Collector's Edition

# The Story of the Elizabethans



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- **Art and entertainment**  Elizabethan explorers **lslamic allies**



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If ever an English monarch merited the byname 'the Great', surely it was the last of the Tudor line: Elizabeth I.

During her reign, England successfully **repelled a mighty** 

**Spanish Armada**. Extravagant 'accession day' celebrations and new theatres, in which William Shakespeare first performed his peerless plays, **revolutionised public entertainment**. Extraordinary palaces and 'prodigy houses' were built – expressions of wealth and artistic exuberance. Groundbreaking trading and diplomatic ties were established with Islamic states across north Africa and the Middle East.

**English explorers ventured far into Asia and the Arctic**, sowing the seeds of a vast British empire. And Elizabeth herself overcame the odds: as a child declared illegitimate and cut from the succession after the execution of her mother, Anne Boleyn, she **faced a series of plots against her life and throne**, yet forged her image as a strong, single-minded

'Virgin Queen' whose memory is widely revered to this day.

Yet many often-overlooked, darker aspects took the shine off her reign.

In this special edition of *BBC History Magazine*, a cadre of experts explore both the triumphs and the more lamentable facets of the Elizabethan era.

We discover the queen's jealous control of the love lives of her courtiers,

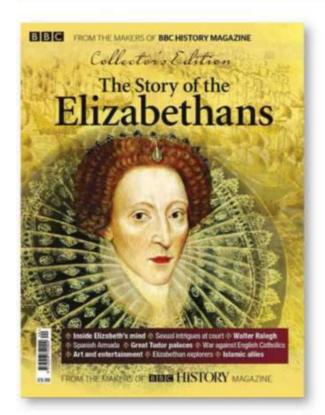
the **hunger, poverty, violence and fear** faced by ordinary folk, the persecution of Catholics - including the torture and execution of dozens of priests - and the bloody

#### suppression of rebellion in Ireland.

The Story of the Elizabethans compiles and updates articles that have appeared previously in BBC History Magazine, along with several new articles written specially for this edition. I hope you enjoy it.

#### **Charlotte Hodgman**

Managing editor



"Elizabeth was a different kind of queen - one who was not afraid to stand out, and who chose to walk her own path in the face of resistance"

Historian and writer **NICOLA TALLIS** discusses why the appeal of the Elizabethan era – and its 'Virgin Queen' – has endured, on page 114

# CONTENTS





#### 6 Timeline

Key events and turning points in the reign of Elizabeth I

# 12 ELIZABETHAN LIVES

## 14 The other Elizabethan England

Tarnya Cooper explains what art of the era reveals about everyday life for Elizabethans, rich and poor

#### **20** The play's one thing...

James Sharpe introduces the range of entertainment and pastimes available to Elizabethan people, rich and poor

#### 27 Hold your noses...

Ian Mortimer evokes the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings and fears of the Elizabethan age

# 34 The dark side of Elizabethan life

Life for thousands of ordinary people was blighted by violence, vagrancy and crushing hunger, says James Sharpe

# 39 Great palaces of Elizabethan England

Roam six of the most magnificent castles, palaces and 'prodigy houses' of the Tudor era with Tracy Borman

# 46 **THE QUEEN AND HER COURT**

## 48 Personal politics in Elizabeth's court

The 'Virgin Queen' jealously controlled her courtiers' love lives - but for sound political reasons, explains Susan Doran

# 54 How Lettice Knollys stole the queen's sweetheart

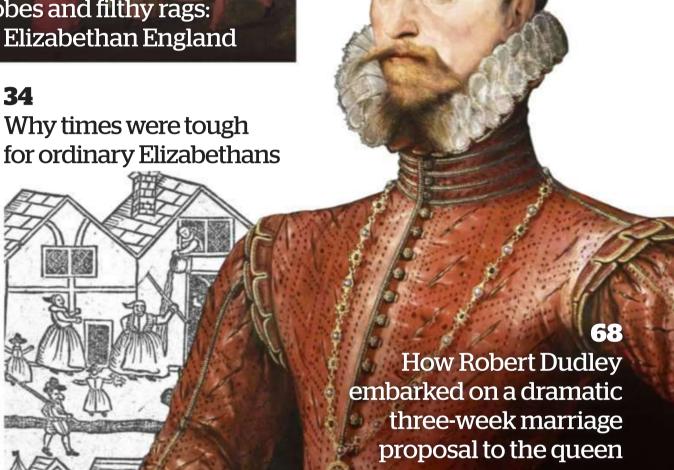
Nicola Tallis tells the story of a Tudor love triangle

#### 59 The unfathomable queen

Helen Castor interprets the thoughts and emotions behind Elizabeth's inscrutable mask







#### 63 The Queen's Day

Anna Whitelock explores the pomp and politics of the annual accession day celebrations

# 68 The three-week wedding proposal

Elizabeth Goldring visits Kenilworth Castle to experience the 'princely pleasures' laid on by Robert Dudley to woo the queen

#### 74 ELIZABETHANS AND THE WORLD

# 76 Elizabeth's war with England's Catholics

Jessie Childs traces the travails of recusants and 'church papists'

## 82 Walter Ralegh: the heroic traitor

Mark Nicholls charts the rise and dramatic fall of the self-made Elizabethan renaissance man

# 89 Eight surprising facts about the Spanish Armada

Robert Hutchinson reveals littleknown aspects of the ill-fated campaign to invade England

#### 96 The Tudors' unlikely allies

After Elizabeth was excommunicated, England embarked on a remarkable relationship with Islamic empires, explains Jerry Brotton

# 101 How exploration laid the foundations of empire

Margaret Small follows in the footsteps of Elizabethan pioneers whose discoveries paved the way for international trade

Celebrating the

monarch's accession day

#### **108** Elizabeth's Irish nemesis

Hiram Morgan tells the story of Earl Hugh O'Neill, whose audacious rebellion almost ended English rule in Ireland

#### 114 Opinion

Nicola Tallis explores the enduring appeal of the Elizabethan age

### The Elizabethan age

**Susan Doran** explores the key events that marked the long reign of England's 'Virgin Queen'

#### 1558

Mary I dies on 17 November, and her half-sister, aged 25, **succeeds to the throne as Elizabeth I**. She immediately appoints Sir William Cecil

(below) as her principal secretary and intimates that she intends to break with Rome (like her father Henry VIII) and to re-introduce the Protestant religious settlement of her halfbrother, Edward VI.

#### 1562

Elizabeth signs a treaty with the Huguenot leaders in France. To secure the return of Calais and prevent the ultra-Catholics led by the powerful Guise family from gaining control of the realm, she agrees to send troops to France under Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick, to fight with the Protestants. The war goes badly for England, and the following year its garrison in Le Havre is decimated by plague, which later spreads to England.



#### **1560**



Elizabeth is shown praying in a frontispiece illustration for a 1569 prayer book

#### **1559**

Elizabeth pushes her religious settlement through parliament: the Act of Supremacy, which declares her to be 'Supreme Governor' of the Church of England, and the Act of Uniformity, which demands conformity to a new Protestant English Prayer Book. The main task ahead is to persuade or compel the many Catholics in England to convert.

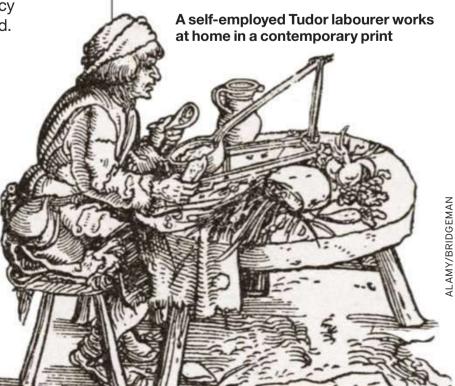
#### **1560**

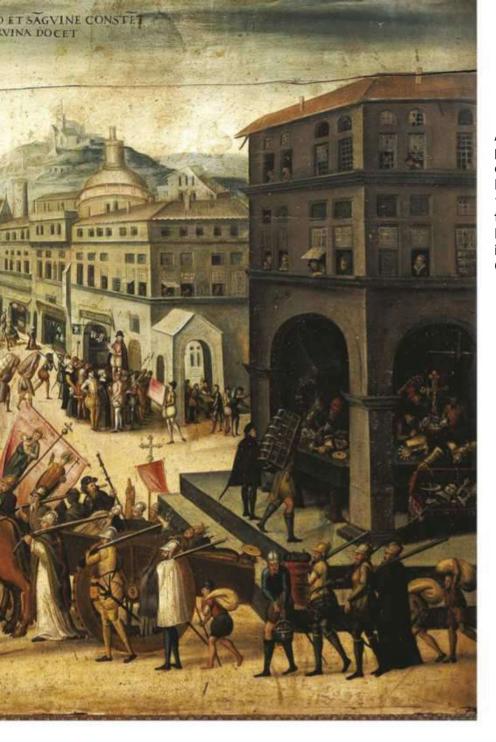
After Elizabeth sends military help to the Protestant 'Lords of the Congregation' against the Catholic regent of Scotland and her French allies, Cecil negotiates the Treaty of Edinburgh.

This agrees to the evacuation of the French from Scotland and recognises Elizabeth's legitimacy as queen of England. Mary, Queen of Scots refuses to sign the treaty.

#### **1563**

Parliament petitions Elizabeth to marry or name a successor. Protestants in both the Commons and Lords fear that, if Elizabeth dies childless, Catholics will try to put Mary, Queen of Scots on the throne. This parliament also passes important social legislation: a new Poor Law, an Act of Artificers regulating apprenticeships, and an act concerning witchcraft.





A contemporary painting depicts the entry into Lyon of Protestant forces in 1562. Elizabeth sent troops to support Protestant Huguenots in their fight against Catholics in France

# 1568

England experiences its first serious quarrel with Spain. In September, a Spanish fleet attacks six English ships illegally slave-trading on the Spanish Main. In December, Elizabeth seizes Spanish treasure destined for the Netherlands. The Spanish ambassador is incensed, and recommends that Spain and the Netherlands suspend trade with England in retaliation.



Pope Pius V, whose bull issued in 1570 excommunicated Elizabeth and led to harsh laws against Catholics in England

#### 1570

In February, Pope Pius V issues the bull Regnans in Excelsis, excommunicating Elizabeth.
From now on, Catholics are seen as potential traitors, and laws against them become harsher.

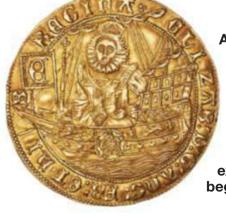
#### **1570**

#### **1564**

William Shakespeare is born in Stratfordupon-Avon, where he is baptised in Holy Trinity Church on 26 April. Little is known about his life from 1585 to 1592 - his so-called 'lost years' during which he moves to London. He works as an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men that performs at The Theatre and then, from 1599 until 1613, at the new Globe Theatre. He dies in 1616.

#### **1566**

Work begins on the Royal Exchange, the brainchild of merchants Richard Clough and Sir Thomas Gresham, who lays its first brick. It is London's first purposebuilt financial exchange and commercial centre, where merchants and shopkeepers from England and abroad carry out their business. It is formally opened by Elizabeth in 1571.



A gold coin minted during Elizabeth's reign. The building of London's first purpose-built financial exchange was begun in 1566

#### **1569**

A domestic crisis erupts, precipitated by the arrival in England of Mary, Queen of Scots the previous year. Thomas, Duke of Norfolk (below) secretly plans to marry the Scottish queen, and in autumn is imprisoned on suspicion of treason. On 9 November, the earls of Northumberland and Westmorland raise rebellion in the north, calling for a change in religion and the formal naming of Mary as Elizabeth's successor. Their rebellion is suppressed after a month of action.

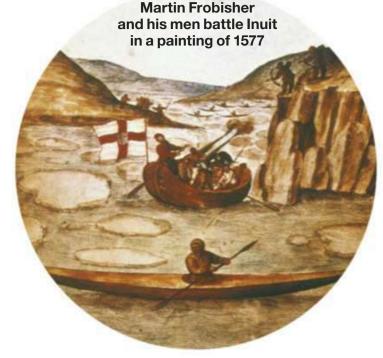
#### **1571**

Anglo-Spanish relations deteriorate further when Cecil uncovers a plot involving the Spanish ambassador, Norfolk, Mary and a Florentine merchant named Roberto Ridolfi. The plotters aim to use Spanish troops and Catholic rebels to depose Elizabeth in favour of Mary. The revelation stokes anti-Catholic sentiment, and parliament calls for the execution of Norfolk and Mary. Elizabeth protects Mary, but Norfolk is executed the following year.

#### 1574

Four Catholic priests arrive from the English seminary at Douai in the Spanish Netherlands (now in northern France) established by William Allen in 1568 to train missionary priests. Though their purpose is ostensibly to administer the sacraments to Catholics, the government believes them to be seditious, and their arrival stokes fears of a Catholic threat.

English Catholic cardinal William Allen, who founded a seminary in Douai, then in the Spanish Netherlands, in 1568

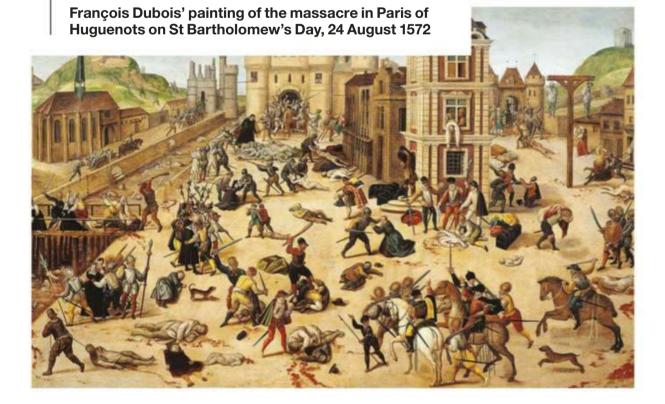


#### 1576

Martin Frobisher sets out to find a north-west passage to the Pacific Ocean and China. He reaches Baffin Island, enters the bay now named after him, and brings back to England an Inuit man and a piece of ore that is believed to be gold. Lured by the promise of riches, he sets out on a second Arctic expedition in 1577 and a third in 1578. He suffers disgrace when it is discovered the ore is not gold.

#### **1572**

As protection against Spain, in April **Elizabeth signs** a **defensive treaty with France**, but the entente is put in jeopardy when the French royal family is involved in the massacre of Huguenots on St Bartholomew's Day.





Negotiations for the marriage of Elizabeth to the Duke of Anjou, depicted in a 16th-century painting

#### **1579**

Elizabeth's negotiations for a marriage with the Duke of Anjou create a political storm. The majority of her privy council is against her marrying a Catholic, and pamphlets and verse stir up public opinion against the marriage. An anti-Anjou pamphlet, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf*, is published. When the author, John Stubbs, and distributor, William Page, are publicly punished – their right hands amputated with a cleaver – the crowd are ominously resentful.



A 16th-century emblem designed to celebrate Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe between 1577 and 1580

#### 1581

In April **Elizabeth knights Francis Drake** on board the *Golden Hind*, docked near Deptford. The previous autumn, Drake had returned from a three-year privateering voyage aboard that vessel that had included a circumnavigation of the globe.

#### • 1586

An Anglo-Scottish defensive alliance is signed at Berwick on 6 July. Elizabeth secretly agrees to give the Protestant Scottish King James VI an annual pension, though she refuses to acknowledge him formally as her heir.

#### 1580

#### 1580

Rebellion spreads in Ireland, and in September a Vatican-sponsored expedition lands in the province of Munster to aid the rebels. After the rebel garrison at Smerwick surrenders, English forces massacre some 600 soldiers.

A modern memorial to Spanish, Italian and Irish soldiers killed at Smerwick by English troops in November 1580

#### **1583**

Francis Throckmorton confesses under torture to involvement in an international plot to assassinate Elizabeth and place Mary, Queen of Scots on the English throne. Also implicated are the Spanish ambassador, French Catholics, English Catholic exiles and Spanish troops from the Low Countries.

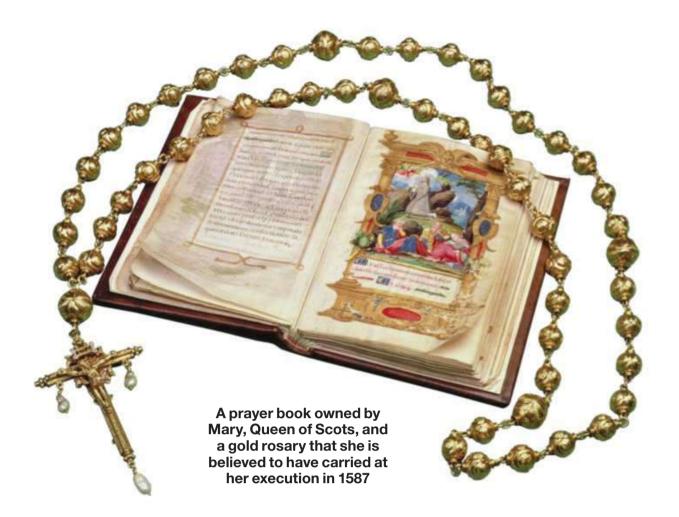


Spanish ships attack Dutch vessels during the siege of Antwerp, 1585. English support for Dutch rebels sparked 19 years of war with Spain

#### 1585

In August, Elizabeth signs the Treaty of Nonsuch with representatives of the United Provinces (the Dutch rebels against Spain). Although no formal declaration of war follows, the decision to send 7,000 men to fight in the Netherlands marks the start of 19 years of fighting between England and Spain that ends only in 1604.

#### The Elizabethans / Timeline



#### 1587

Mary, Queen of Scots is executed on 8 February at Fotheringhay Castle, having been convicted of treason the previous October after the uncovering of the Babington Plot to assassinate the queen. Elizabeth has held off signing the death warrant for several months, and blames her junior secretary for passing it on to the executioners.

#### 1590

Archbishop John Whitgift brings a number of Presbyterians before the Court of High Commission. Among them is Thomas Cartwright (below), the theologian thought of as the 'father of English Presbyterianism'.



1590

#### **1588**

Philip II of Spain launches his Grand Armada to support an invasion of England by troops gathered in the Netherlands. At the battle of Gravelines, English fire-ships break the Spanish formation, forcing the Spanish fleet to sail around the British Isles before eventually limping home to Spain. The English see the Spanish defeat as the work of God.



English ships fight the Spanish Armada in 1588, in a contemporary painting. Though English fire-ships inflicted heavy losses on the Armada, the Spanish campaign had already been compromised by bad weather and poor planning

#### **1592**

Plague spreads throughout London in an epidemic lasting nearly two years. The government orders the closure of the theatres to prevent further contagion. While they are closed, William Shakespeare writes his narrative poems Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece. Around 11,000 Londoners are reported to have died from the pestilence.



1596

The young Robert Devereux (left), 2nd Earl of Essex, is lauded as a hero of the Cádiz Expedition. He is one of the commanders of the English fleet that attacks Spanish ships in that port before capturing the citadel and plundering the town. Elizabeth is, however, critical of his conduct – he disobeyed orders and failed to bring home sufficient loot.

An early 17th-century illustration of the funeral procession of Elizabeth I to Westminster Abbey on 28 April 1603

#### **1603**

Elizabeth dies on
24 March after a short
illness. Her principal
secretary Sir Robert
Cecil and his associates
ensure the smooth
succession of James VI
of Scotland to the throne
as James I of England.

Susan Doran is professor of early modern British history at the University of Oxford, and author of *Elizabeth I and her Circle* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

#### 1600

#### **1593**

The 29-year-old playwright and poet **Christopher Marlowe is stabbed to death** in mysterious circumstances at a house (possibly a tavern) in Deptford, near London. His plays include *Tamburlaine* the Great, The Jew of Malta, Dr Faustus and Edward II.



**1599** 

Essex arrives in Ireland at the head of a 17,000-strong army with instructions to crush Irish rebels led by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. Against orders, Essex negotiates a truce with Tyrone; on returning to court, he is immediately arrested.

A painting from 1585 believed to portray playwright Christopher Marlowe as a young man of 21



A 17th-century woodcut depicting the execution of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex

#### 1601

Failing to return to royal favour, Essex tries unsuccessfully to raise London against his enemies, whom he claims are planning to make peace terms with Spain that would include the recognition of Philip III's sister as Elizabeth's heir. **Essex is executed** in February.

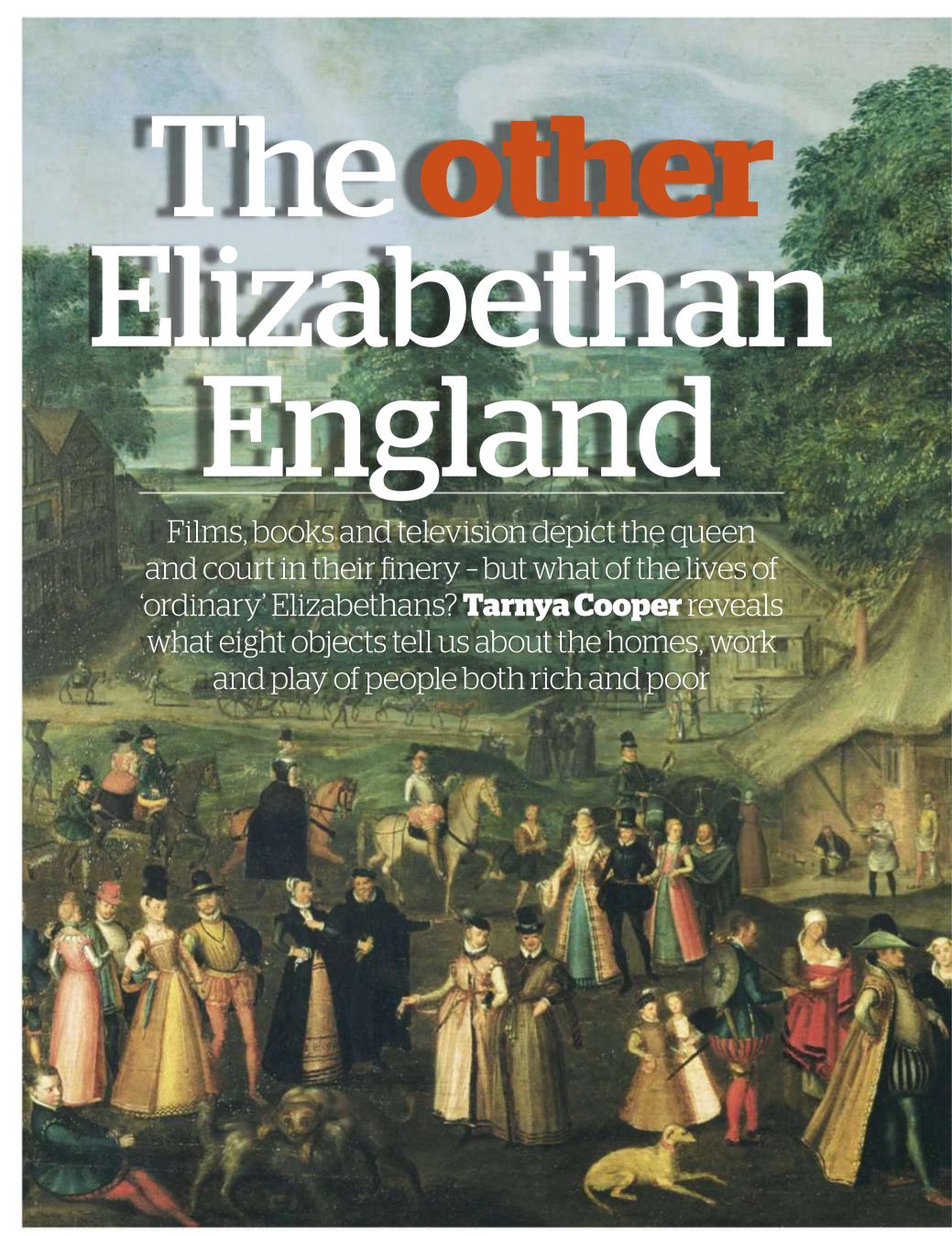
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- \* Hold your noses!

  Experience the era's sights, sounds, smells and fears
- The dark side of Elizabethan life
  How ordinary people battled hunger and violence
- **Great palaces of Elizabethan England**Explore magnificent castles, palaces and 'prodigy houses'



# BETHAN LIVES









Work

# The uniform of the working poor

This extraordinary outfit, worn by a sailor or fisherman in the late 16th or early 17th century, provides a rare link to the world of the working poor. These are the people who served in the army or the navy, swept the streets, washed clothes or carried water – the kind of men and women of whom no portraits or images exist.

This loose-fitting outfit has been heavily worn, is spotted with tar, and has been regularly patched. The full breeches would have allowed for ease of movement climbing up and down rigging. The garment owes its survival to generations of painters, who kept it in a dressing-up box.



#### Work

# A skilled surgeon instructs his class

Painted in 1581, this image shows a doctor, John Banister, delivering an anatomy lecture for students at Surgeon's Hall, London.

Changes in society, such as increased education and literacy, had a considerable impact on working life for the 'middling sort'. Working people, such as lawyers, clergymen and doctors, cultivated a new sense of their own importance, and some chose to be depicted in portraits that highlight their skills.

This painting reveals how the thirst for knowledge was slowly starting to play a part in the development of education, and is a subject matter more frequently found in portraiture of the 17th century.

Well-known figures such as Shakespeare and Sir Walter Ralegh are usually credited with the great achievements of the Elizabethan age. Yet many less-celebrated men and women contributed to both economic prosperity and advances in knowledge.



#### **Play**

#### All of society descends on Bermondsey

A Fete at Bermondsey, the superbly detailed painting shown on pages 14 and 15, depicts a village celebration on the banks of the river Thames. Probably painted by Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder in c1569/70, it seems to intentionally encompass all of Elizabethan society – and, in doing so, provides a rare insight into the lives of Elizabethans outside the confines of the court.

Here we show two details from the painting: an elegant nobleman in a long, pale cloak (pictured left) and a pair of musicians dressed in red (right), possibly with the artist alongside them. They are joined in the painting by cooks and serving men, women busy at work, merchants, servants in livery, labourers in the distant sawmill, children at play and a man in stocks.

Elizabethans were very aware of divisions in society. The writer Thomas Smith stated in his 1583 book *De Republica Anglorum* that: "We in England divide our men commonly into foure sortes, gentlemen, citizens, yeomen artificers, and laborers." Nearly all of the people Smith lists can be seen in Joris Hoefnagel's fete scene.





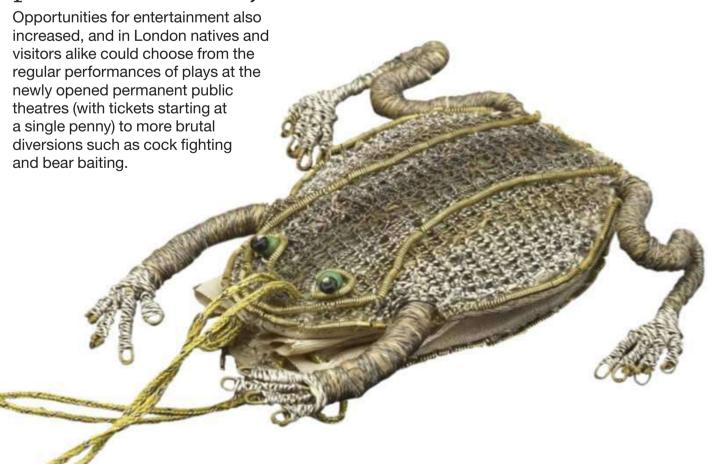


#### **Play**

#### How a shopaholic spent her money

Fashioned from silver, gilt thread and glass beads, this rather strange purse in the shape of a small frog is very much a product of the rapid growth in the luxury goods market during the Elizabethan period. Made in the early 17th century, it was designed to complement a fashionable woman's outfit, and would have been used to carry small items such as coins, pins, needles and thread.

During Elizabeth's reign, the wealthy found that they had more scope for spending on sumptuous luxury goods and accessories than ever before – the first 'shopping mall' opening in London in 1568 as part of the Royal Exchange.





#### **Home**

#### A maid of honour surrounds herself with pearls and pendants

This remarkable portrait depicts Elizabeth Vernon, a female courtier and maid of honour to Elizabeth I, in her dressing chamber. Vernon became Countess of Southampton in 1598, the year this picture is believed to have been painted. Here she is shown in the process of dressing (or undressing), while combing her hair. An array of pearl necklaces, jewelled bracelets and pendants can be seen laid out on the table next to the countess.

This portrait gives an indication of the cost and labour of dressing in elite households, and may have been painted for Vernon's new husband, the flamboyant Henry, Earl of Southampton – William Shakespeare's only known patron.

#### **Home**

#### A nurse clasps a tragic child

This tender and touching portrait provides an insight into the domestic context of well-to-do households. It depicts a nurse holding a well-dressed young boy, perhaps giving an intimation of the bonds that must have existed between servants and their masters, particularly when they cared for children. The portrait is thought to depict John Dunch, the young son of Edmund and Anne Dunch, members of the gentry from Little Wittenham in Berkshire. John died in 1589, shortly after this portrait was painted. The nurse may be Elizabeth Field, a long-serving attendant who is mentioned in the will of Anne Dunch.

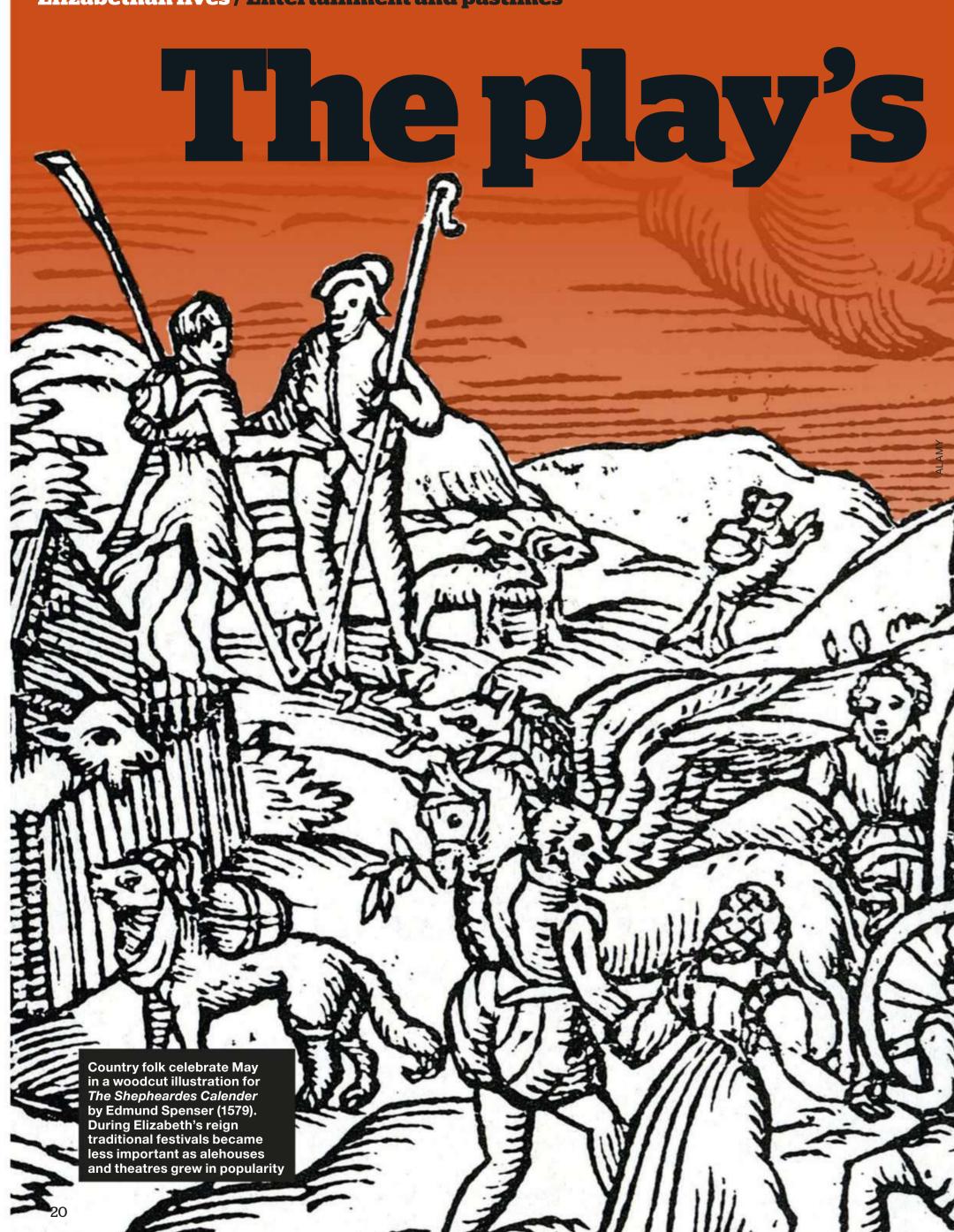


**Dr Tarnya Cooper** is curatorial and collections director of the National Trust. She is the author of *Citizen Portrait: Portrait Painting and the Urban Elite of Tudor and Jacobean England and Wales* (Yale, 2012) and *Elizabeth I and Her People* (National Portrait Gallery, 2013)

#### ON THE PODCAST

Tarnya Cooper discusses Elizabethan society on our weekly podcast

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Elizabeth's reign is renowned as the dawn of English theatre, when timeless talents such as Shakespeare and Marlowe emerged. But as James Sharpe reveals, a host of other entertainments and pastimes were available to rich and poor

n 1567, London grocer John Brayne embarked on a new business venture. At a cost of about £20, he built England's first theatre in a yard at the Red Lion, a farm in Whitechapel just outside the City of London.

The venture was not a successful one. Though the exact circumstances have proved impossible to delineate, the Red Lion soon fell into disuse as a theatre. Undeterred, in 1576 Brayne – together with his brother-in-law James Burbage, father of the actor Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's associate – opened a more successful venture, known simply as The Theatre. That opening marked the beginning of a flourishing era of theatrical performances in London.

During the last three decades of Elizabeth's reign, Londoners could attend a number of theatres – most famously The Globe, which opened on Bankside in 1599, but also The Curtain, The Rose, The Fortune and others. These were open to all who could afford to enter them; richer theatregoers paid a premium for places in (typically three) terraces of covered seats, while 'groundlings' paid their pennies to crowd into the open space in front of the stage. By 1610, the year in which Shakespeare probably wrote Cymbeline and when the theatres reopened after an enforced period of closure during a plague outbreak, it's been estimated that London's total theatre capacity on any one night was some 10,000.

Plays were not new in England in Elizabeth's reign. Sometimes described as 'interludes', plays of various sorts had long been performed at court, in the courtyards of inns, at Oxford Colleges, in provincial towns and in London's Inns of Court. (The first English play in blank verse, Gorboduc, had been performed during the Christmas celebrations of the Inner Temple in 1561–62.) In addition, rather different performances might accompany religious festivals in rural parishes and major cities alike. But the professionalisation of drama was new, fashioned above all to meet the changing tastes of an urban elite. Indeed, parallel developments took place in a number of continental cities.

The development of purpose-built theatres made the storage of props and costumes easier, and nurtured permanent companies of actors and stars of the stage (such as Richard Burbage). Writing plays could add to an author's lustre and income.

In Elizabethan theatres, richer patrons sat in covered terraces, while 'groundlings' paid just a penny to stand in the open space in front of the stage

It's been estimated that by 1610 London's total theatre capacity on any given night was some **10,000** 

In addition to Shakespeare, the latter years of Elizabeth's reign witnessed the flourishing of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton and others. For most modern readers, the arrival of the professional, commercial theatre in London is the most striking element in the evolution of Elizabethan entertainments.

#### Festivals and football

Less familiar to many today was the annual round of festivals crucial to the culture of late medieval English Christianity. These were apparently extremely popular, but wilted rapidly after the religious settlement of 1559 ensured that England would become a Protestant nation. Such festivals varied enormously in size and elaborateness. At one end of the spectrum sat the parish ales or other

local feasts, often held in the name of the relevant parish's patron saint, affairs

that encouraged communal solidarity. These events also, through the sale of food and drink, raised money for the poor.

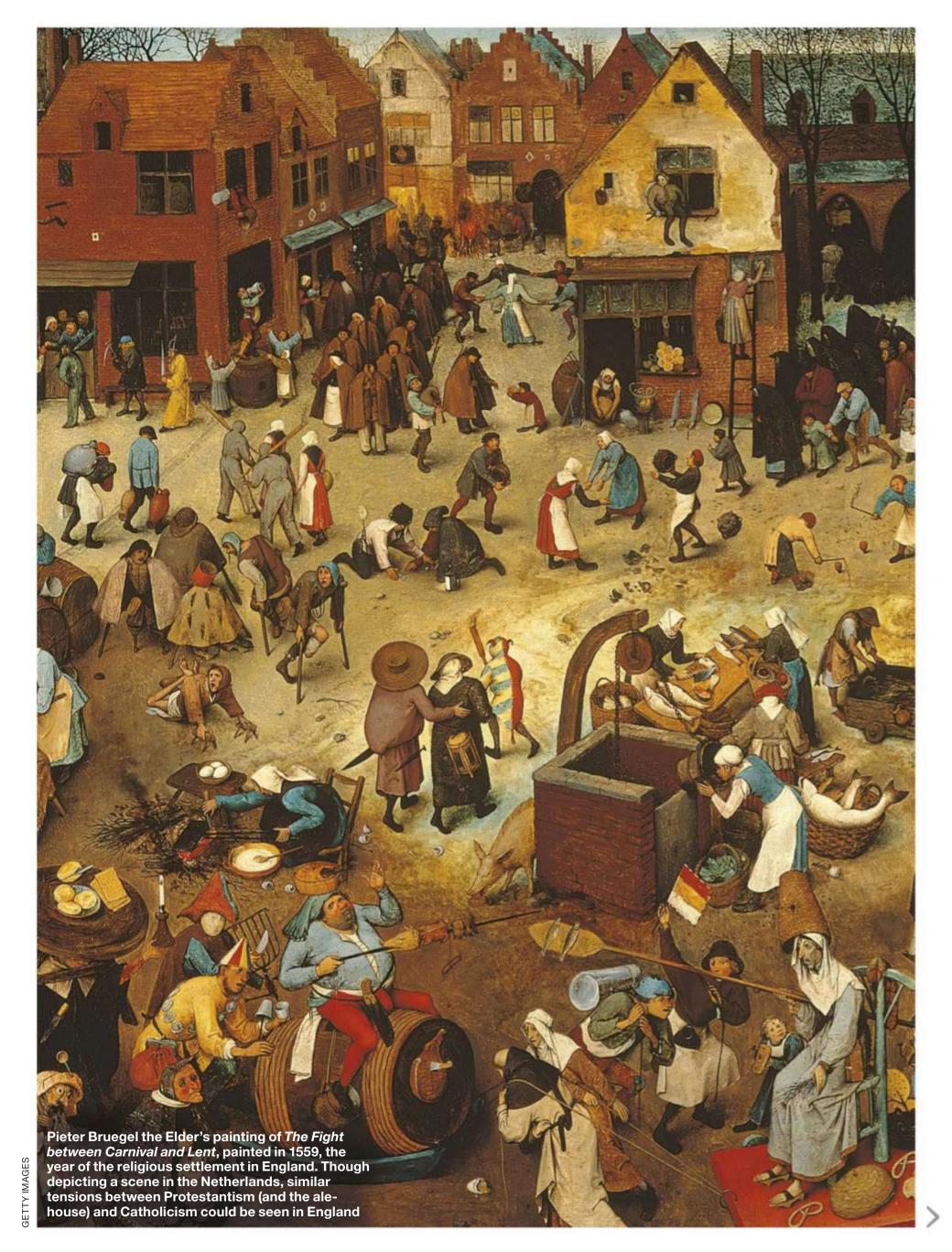
Other celebrations were much larger in scale and scope. For example, during the Corpus Christi celebrations at York, the consecrated host was placed in a silver-andcrystal shrine protected by a canopy, to be processed along a route past houses hung with tapestries, with fresh rushes and flowers laid at their doors. Fifty-two plays were performed by the city's various craft guilds, telling the Christian story from the creation to doomsday.

This rich, Catholic, popular culture was shattered under Edward VI, enjoyed a considerable revival under Mary I, but then declined under Elizabeth. The main agents of change were godly reformers in positions of local power. York's Corpus Christi celebrations, for example, were ended as part of a more general attack on traditional practices in the north headed by a trio of reformists – the dean of York, the archbishop of York and the Earl of Huntingdon, who became Lord President of the Council of the North in 1572.

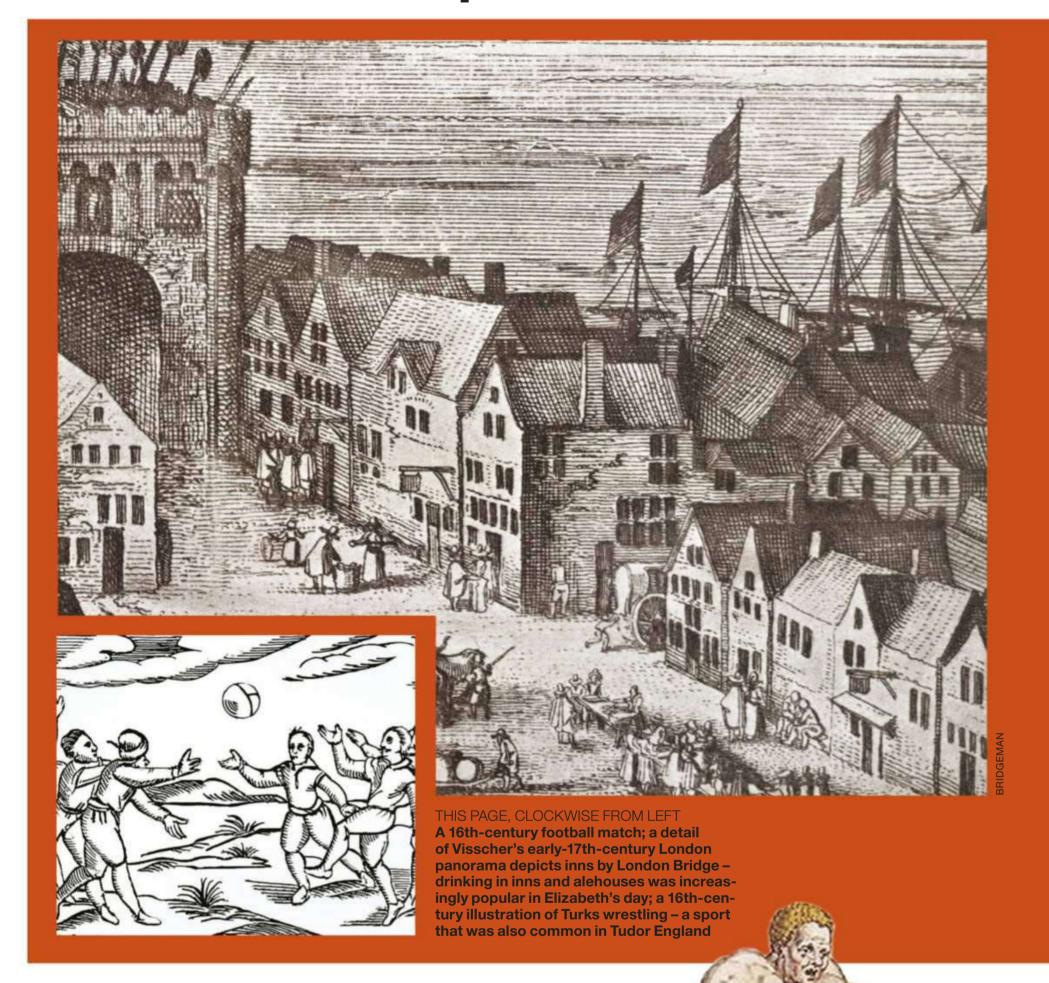
By the end of Elizabeth's reign, a new annual celebration had established itself as a vital element in the festive calendar: the Queen's accession day, 17 November, the anniversary of Elizabeth's taking the crown (hence the popular name for the festival, 'Crownation Day'). It became established largely after the Northern Rising of 1569 and the papal bull excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570. (For more on Queen's Day, see page 63).

Though celebrations associated with the old ritual year were waning, there is scattered evidence of popular pastimes of a more secular nature: wrestling, football (another target of Puritan opprobrium), archery, hunting – of which Elizabeth was fond – cock-fighting, and bull- and bear-baiting, in which the unfortunate animals were attacked by dogs.

Above all, though, the decline of the traditional, and largely Catholic, calendar of festive events coincided with increased involvement in another leisure-time activity: going to the alehouse. In Elizabethan England there was a tripartite division of drinking establishments. Inns were generally respectable establishments that offered accommodation for people and Elizabethan England there was a tripartite



#### **Elizabethan lives / Entertainment and pastimes**

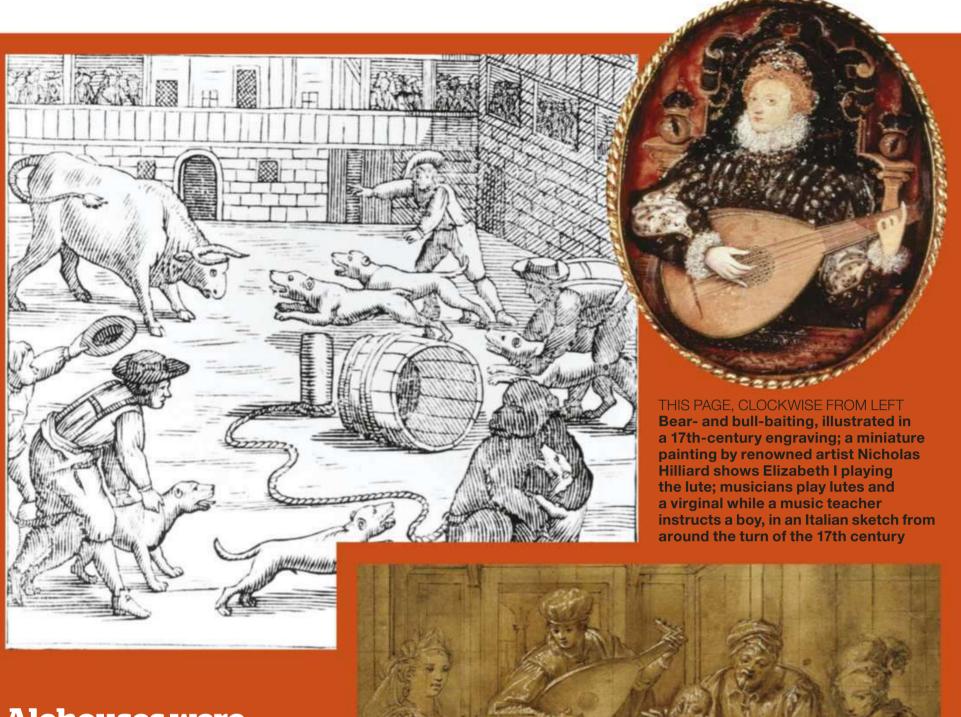


their horses; taverns sold wine, along with beer and ale, and likewise usually attracted a better class of client; alehouses, though, varied vastly in quality and the nature of their clientele.

Alehouses (which, despite their name, increasingly sold hopped beer rather than traditional ale) were a cause of growing concern to both local authorities and moralists, who saw them as nests of disorder and sinfulness, and nurseries of idleness. They were certainly numerous. A government survey of 1577, probably drawn up with taxation in mind, showed that in 30 counties and six boroughs of England there were 15,095 alehouses, along with 2,161 inns and 339 taverns,

suggesting that there was an alehouse for every 55 inhabitants in Cheshire, and one for every 60 in Essex.

Controlling the alehouse became a priority for local authorities, and their records provide a large volume of material indicating how Elizabethans spent their leisure time. The unusually well-documented county of Essex provides ample evidence in this regard, with numerous references to people playing at cards, 'tables' – the contemporary term for backgammon – or dicing, these activities usually being accompanied by gambling. Another commonly mentioned game was



Alehouses were a cause of concern to local authorities and moralists, who saw them as nests of disorder and sinfulness

shovegroat or shovelboard, the antecedent of the more-modern amusement shove ha'penny.

Bowling alleys were attached to many alehouses; one Essex alehouse-keeper was prosecuted, along with three of his customers, following complaints that they "usually play at bowls on the Sabbath day and other days continually". Other alehouse-keepers got into trouble for adding dancing to the assorted disorders allegedly taking place on their premises. An Essex landlord was reprimanded in 1571 for "evil rule in his house and receiving other men's servants in the night-time and at other unlawful times to cards and dancing and other unlawful games". Such

references suggest that Elizabeth's poorer subjects indulged in a broad spectrum of popular pastimes, pursued in defiance of officialdom.

#### **Sound ideas**

An interest that was shared across the social spectrum, but which in Elizabethan times seems to have taken on a special attraction for relatively elite people, was music.

Obviously, dancing at the alehouse required fiddlers or other musicians, and towns frequently boasted established groups of musicians – the 'waits' – which were sometimes very accomplished musical ensembles. But a cult of amateur musicmaking, both instrumental and vocal, seems

to have flourished in Elizabethan gentry households, and musicians might enjoy the patronage of aristocratic patrons such as the Earl of Leicester and Lord Burghley.

Music was, of course, a central feature of court ceremony and entertainment, and the period saw a revival of musical activity in England's cathedrals. But it is striking that a cult of the amateur (usually gentry) music-maker emerged in Elizabethan England: many households brought their members together to play music or sing madrigals, and often employed a music tutor both to improve their own skills and to nurture those of their children.

Another leisure activity that flourished widely in Elizabethan England, although

#### **Elizabethan lives / Entertainment and pastimes**



again more predominantly among the rich, was reading. Levels of literacy – and, indeed, methods of accurately measuring literacy – in early modern England remain disputed, yet a rough estimate suggests that by 1603 about 30 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women were literate. Of course, these figures mask massive geographical and class variations: literacy was more widespread in the south, and more prevalent higher up the social scale – it would be difficult to find an illiterate gentleman in 1603, but not much easier to find literate agricultural labourers.

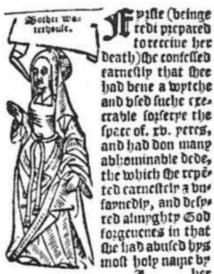
#### Flourishing print culture

What is obvious is that a flourishing print culture developed, catering for a wide range of potential readers. The new demands that the Reformation placed on the individual believer meant that religious works found a ready readership, but other forms of publication aimed at a wider readership also developed, admittedly frequently with a godly slant. The first pamphlet describing a witch trial was published in 1566, and the first describing a murder case appeared at about the same time; soon a genre emerged describing such events, along with monstrous births, dramatic storms, the progress of comets, accounts of giant fish washed up on England's beaches and elsewhere, and

described witch trials, monstrous births, dramatic storms and giant fish washed up on England's beaches

A pamphlet describing a witch trial – that of Mother Agnes Waterhouse, who was convicted and hanged – published in 1566, the first of a popular new genre

Ethe ende and last confession of mother Waterhouse at her beath, whiche was the spir, daye of July.



a whole gamut of natural disasters. Readers could also enjoy poetry written by English authors or (if monoglot) from other languages in translation, and those attracted to a more popular poetic form could turn to printed ballads. Clearly, literacy had many purposes, not least recreation.

Life for many Elizabethans was hard, and for most of them uncertain. But for the majority of people culture was characterised by a range of leisure-time activities, pastimes and communal celebrations that offered them enjoyment in a variety of forms: dancing, making music, reading, watching or being involved in accession day ceremonies, or joining the audience at The Globe to enjoy one of Shakespeare's plays.

James Sharpe is professor emeritus of early modern history at the University of York. His books include *Early Modern England:* A Social History 1550-1760 (Edward Arnold, 2nd edn 1997)

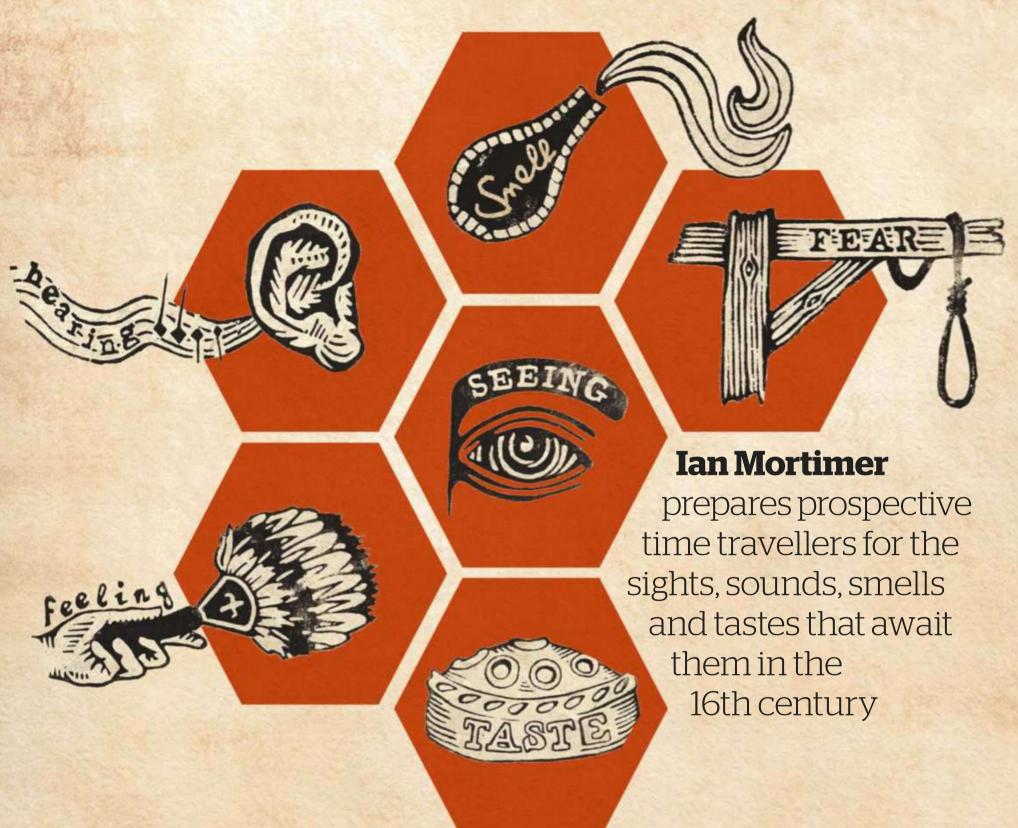
#### **DISCOVER MORE**

#### **BOOKS**

► The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700 by Ronald Hutton (Oxford University Press, 1994)

▶ Playgoing in Shakespeare's London by Andrew Gurr (Cambridge University Press, 1987)

# HOLD YOUR NOSES...



# IT'S THE ELIZABETHANS!

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BECCA THORNE

# raditionally, the past is something we look at from afar. The very act of 'doing history' is one of reaching for something that has gone and is therefore, by definition, out of reach. So it is hardly surprising that we approach its remains objectively, picking over them with a pair of metaphorical tweezers.

But what would we feel if the past were not out of reach? Imagine how your ideas about the past would be different if you could get close up and personal with your forebears. What would you notice if you could see through their eyes, hear with their ears, and smell through their nostrils? What were the tastes and feelings of the past? Can we make any headway in trying to recover them?

Adopting this approach is a particularly interesting exercise when it comes to Elizabethan England – much more revealing than simply looking at ourselves in a 450-year-old mirror. Not only do we see the similarities, but we see the differences, too – the cruelty of a society that enthusiastically supports baiting games, regularly sentences people to horrific executions, and approves of torture in the interests of the state. We see the extraordinary hierarchy, violence and misogyny of society, and how young people are (half of them are under 22).

And then, as we peel away the layers of tradition that make us feel that we are fundamentally the same as Shakespeare's contemporaries, we realise that they inhabit a sensory world that is considerably different from our own. Few people can come to terms with humanity in another age and not see themselves in a new – and sometimes quite disturbing – light.

### The **visual** world

Darkness reigns in a era when only the rich can afford glass

or six months of every year there is less than 12 hours of daylight, and street lighting is almost unheard of in Elizabethan England, so time out of doors in autumn and winter is characterised by darkness.

But dimness is also an aspect of being indoors, even in summer. Domestic glass is rare, because of the paucity of glassmakers in 16th-century England. Although the aristocracy have used glass since the late Middle Ages, and the Countess of Shrewsbury famously has "more glass than wall" at Hardwick Hall, most houses have only small windows to prevent massive heat loss in winter.

Wooden shutters or small opaque screens of horn are used to cover the windows, so there is never much light inside. In winter, you will walk around a farmhouse or cottage in near-darkness.

Candles are expensive and, if unprotected by a lantern casing, they constitute a serious fire hazard, so most people make do with just one or two, and carry them between rooms. If they cannot afford wax candles, then they use tallow candles and rushlights – or just the light from the hearth.

When you do have light, you will notice that Elizabethans see colour differently from you, because of the restricted range of dyes in nature. The only natural red in England is madder (taken from the plant of that name);

most women have their petticoats dyed this colour. If you want a brighter red, you will need to obtain it from abroad.

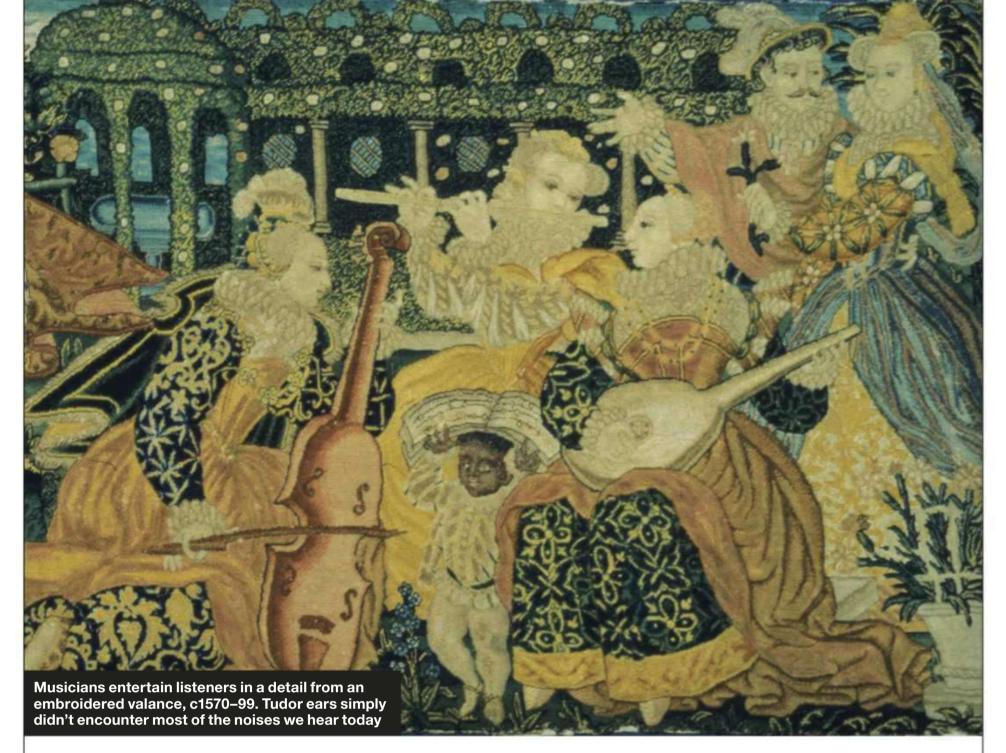
Scarlet is made from kermes, a parasitic larva from the Mediterranean. Cochineal is hardly known in England, being made from an insect in Latin America, and brazilwood has to be imported from the Middle East or bought from Portuguese traders coming from the New World. These sources are not easily available to English merchants, being under the control of Catholic states – especially the Spanish, who are at war with the English from 1585.

As for purple, very few Elizabethans will have ever seen it. The nearest shade they will have seen is a sort of violet made from madder and the only natural blue dye commonly available in England, woad. If you were to appear in a purple shirt, you would leave Elizabethans reeling.

Status is not the only significance of colour. True black (again, very rare) is a sign of death and mourning. It also symbolises eternity. White symbolises virginity, so the queen's use of black and white clothing in her early years is a bold statement of her intention to remain unwed.

Were you to visit Elizabethan England, you would need to learn a whole new visual vocabulary to understand these modes of expression among those who can afford them.





# The **aural** experience

Bells and bagpipes shatter the silence

n modern times there have been various brave attempts to recreate the 'authentic' sounds of the past by playing the music on instruments constructed to contemporary designs. As you will soon realise from experiencing sensations in Elizabethan England, even if you can recreate the authentic sound, you cannot recreate the experience of hearing that sound – because listening to music takes place in a different context in Elizabethan times.

There is no backdrop of motor, train and air traffic; there are no blaring sirens, no recorded music or radio, and no hum of electrical appliances. In fact, there are very few loud noises. There is thunder; occasionally there is the report of a gun or cannon; and certain instruments such as large bells, trumpets and shawms (woodwind instruments like early oboes) can create a striking impression, as can the galloping of many horses together. But these things are heard only occasionally or in specific situations. The general range of aural experience is therefore much narrower, and sounds are normally heard in isolation.

Elizabethans notice when a church bell rings the hour – they sometimes refer to a time as 'ten of the bell', rather than 'ten of the clock' – because they are used to listening out for the time. People also listen to music more intently because it stands out from their normal day-to-day silence.

A large number of people play an instrument of some sort. At the bottom end of society, you will most often encounter the bagpipes and fiddle. Walk into an alehouse in London at the end of the day and you will frequently be

There is no backdrop of motor, train and air traffic; there are no blaring sirens

encouraged to dance by a smiling musician or two.

Most large towns employ their own small bands of musicians – called 'waits' – who regularly play in public. The wealthy employ their own bands to perform the airs and madrigals that comprise the most popular musical entertainment of the day.

For most ordinary Elizabethans, however, it is a rare privilege to hear a five-part air by Anthony Holborne, John Dowland or Thomas Morley, played on a selection of viols and violins, citterns (like mandolins), recorders, flutes and keyboard instruments (harpsichord, spinet and virginal). That is why they stand and gape while you, with your far greater aural experience, might consider the music quite ordinary.

A 16th-century woodcut shows a man ringing a bell

# The **olfactory** landscape

The wealthy wash themselves daily; the masses go filthy

believe that all Elizabethans are smelly (like everyone else living before Jane Austen, except the Romans). In reality, the personal and public olfactory landscape is far more complex.

At one end of the scale, if you are circumnavigating the world with Francis Drake in the years 1577–80, it is true that you will not bathe. Your hair and clothes will have lice, and you will stink to high heaven – but so will everyone else on the ship (as will the ship itself). Your breath will reek. But in the context of the psychological pressures of such a voyage, including the awareness that most of the crew will die along the way, your shipmates' aroma is the least of your worries.

At the other end of the spectrum, wealthy people wash themselves daily by rubbing themselves in clean linen and washing their hands and faces in clean water. They immerse themselves occasionally in hot water carefully selected for its purity. They wash their hands before, after and during every meal. They wash their hair in lye, clean their teeth with tooth powder, and sweeten their breath with mouthwashes and liquorice.

In the presence of a refined lady you will not smell her body but, rather, the perfume she is wearing and the orris root with which her clothes were powdered while in storage.

Water availability is the key. If you live in a rented room on the fourth or fifth floor of an old timber-framed townhouse it will simply be too much effort to go to the public conduit to fetch enough water for a bath, to carry it up the stairs and then heat it up. In any case, you probably won't be able to afford the firewood to heat the water if you are staying in such a tenement. Nor will you be able to afford fresh linen every day to rub yourself clean. So you will go filthy.



Those of a comparable wealth to you will understand. People of a similar social standing accept similar conditions. They smell each other and know that they themselves smell, too, but they also know how much it costs to smell like a perfumed lady or gentleman. Living in close proximity to one another, and recognising that the alternatives are unaffordable, they get used to their own smells and the smells of those they know.

Much the same can be said for sanitation. If you don't have a private water supply, you won't be able to build a water closet, even if

If you're too poor to eat, the last thing you want is the additional cost of getting rid of detritus and faeces



you can afford to build a copy of Sir John Harington's flushing loo. Moreover, if you and 20 other family members and neighbours are sharing a single cesspit, it will need emptying regularly. The cost of removing a few tonnes of excrement, kitchen waste and menstrual cloths can be high – £2 4s in 1575, the equivalent of 132 days' work for a labourer. So the poor don't have their own cesspits but instead use common sewers and public latrines. If you're too poor to eat, the last thing you want is the additional cost of getting rid of detritus and faeces.

# Feeling your way

Visiting the surgeon could prove a real pain

The darkness we encountered in the visual world discussed on page 24 explains why Elizabethans rely on their sense of touch far more than we do in the modern world. In short, they often cannot see where they are going. Hence finding objects, moving from room to room or even making a visit to the outhouse is much more a matter of touch than sight.

Another variation in feeling relates to the things with which people surround themselves. Clothes vary hugely in texture, from very fine linen to coarse canvas. At the top end of society the finest fabrics, such as silk, lawn and velvet, provide a much greater range of soft tactile sensations than the textiles available to those at the bottom, who have to make do with canvas, buckram, worsted, serge, bays and linsey-wolsey. The same is true for bed linen and bedding. Fine holland sheets and two or three 'feather beds' (ie feather mattresses) on a slung bed with down-filled pillows are a luxury far beyond the reach of most labourers' families. They have to get by with straw mattresses on boards, with canvas sheets and a wooden headrest.

The cleanliness of the bedding will also be something you feel: vermin such as body lice, bed bugs and fleas

get everywhere, and you can be sure of not feeling the biting and itching only if you have new bedding on a new mattress.

There is also the perennial problem of how to keep warm. This is not to be underestimated, especially during a harsh Elizabethan winter (such as that of 1564–65). Firewood is scarce and expensive, and coal used only for industrial work, so fires are not left burning in every room. Many bed chambers have no fireplaces at all, and most windows are without glass. Even when shuttered, cold draughts get in and out. Gentlemen's houses normally have just one or two fires burning through the day.

The only way to be sure of keeping warm is to wear lots of layers and to keep active. It is no wonder that the elderly do not last long. For the old, and especially the aged poor, winters are deadly.

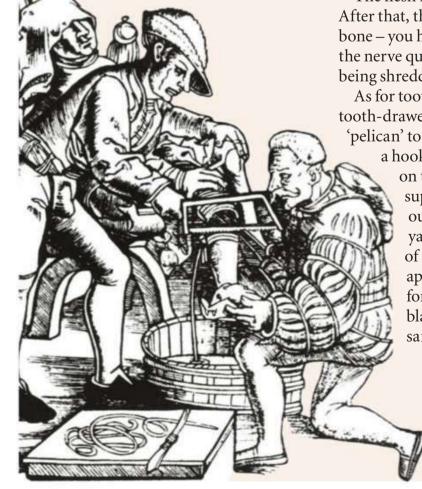
We feel pain in all ages, but in extreme situations we want to have some way of controlling it. Opiates are available to Elizabethan surgeons, but they are expensive. If you have to have part of a limb removed, the operation will normally be done without any painkiller better than copious amounts of alcohol – wine if you can afford it, beer if you cannot.

The flesh is cut with a sharp knife. After that, the surgeon saws through the bone – you have to hope he cuts through the nerve quickly to prevent it from being shredded in the teeth of the saw.

As for toothache, you could go to a tooth-drawer. He will use an iron 'pelican' to solve the problem. This has

a hook that goes under the tooth on the tongue side; the supporting side goes on the outside of the mouth. He then yanks out the tooth by means of a long handle. If that doesn't appeal, you could always ask for help from your local blacksmith, who will do the same thing with his pliers.

This woodcut shows a surgeon performing an amputation in the 16th century



## Good and bad taste

Hunger turns everyone into a foodie

It is said that there is no sauce quite like hunger. For this reason, you may safely assume that poor Elizabethans enjoy their plain meals just as much as the rich enjoy their feasts and banquets. Food is not as scarce as in the late medieval and early Tudor periods, and nowhere near as scarce as it was in early medieval times; nonetheless, you will be shocked at proportionately how expensive it is.

Consider the price of meat in relation to a worker's wage. On average, an Elizabethan sheep costs 3s – nine times as much as a worker's daily wage in southern England – even though the largest sheep weigh about 60lbs, much less than half the weight of its modern descendants. You might like to ponder on that ratio: if meat had the same value to us today, a small sheep would cost about £900 and a modern 180lb animal about three times that.

Another way of gauging how special food is to Elizabethans is to reflect that, in the famine of 1594–97, thousands died of starvation. When you can't take meals for granted, the taste of food is going to occupy a more important position in your life.

The diet eaten by the poor will probably not strike you as particularly exciting. For them, however, chicken boiled for an hour with garlic and cabbage is an absolute godsend.

Although you may turn your nose up at plain, over-boiled meat, it is just as well it is over-boiled when it is several days

old – both the water and the meat might poison you. This explains the tradition of boiling everything and serving it with butter. You will be surprised at how much butter is consumed by all classes.

Without doubt, you will prefer to dine on the food of the rich. This especially applies if you enjoy roast meats. In order to entertain the queen for just two days at Kirtling in 1577, Lord North lays in store  $11\frac{1}{2}$  cows,  $17\frac{1}{2}$  veal calves, 67 sheep, 7 lambs, 34 pigs, 96 conies (rabbits), 8 stags, 16 bucks, 8 gammons of bacon, 32 geese, 363 capons, 6 turkeys, 32 swans, 273 ducks, 1 crane, 38 heronsews, 110 bitterns, 12 shovellers, 1,194 chickens, 2,604 pigeons, 106 pewits, 68 godwits, 18 gulls, 99 dotterels, 8 snipe, 29 knots, 28 plovers, 5 stints, 18 redshanks, 2 yerwhelps (another wading bird), 22 partridges, 344 quail, 2 curlews and a pheasant. And that is just the meat.

By law, on three days a week you are not allowed to eat red meat, so the wealthy eat a wide range of fish. Most of this is baked or stewed and served in sauces made of spices, mustard, salt, sugar and vinegar. Beware: the strong flavours will not be to everyone's taste.

At a banquet (a selection of sweets following a feast), you might be startled to see marzipan sculptures dyed blue and green with azurite and spinach. And it might take you a little while to get used to sweetmeats that really are meats mixed with sugar and spices. You'll even be able to tuck into mince pies made with mutton.



A woodcut from 1518 shows cooks preparing a meal in a kitchen

# **Fear** and loathing

Terror stalks an age of plague and paranoia

he past 50 years have been the most complacent and least fearful half-century ever experienced in Britain. People do not starve in their thousands. In the 21st century we do not have to live with the continual daily threat of plague (which killed approximately 250,000 Elizabethans) or influenza (the outbreak of which in 1557–59 killed about five per cent of England's population – more than twice the proportion killed by the First World War and the influenza pandemic of 1918–19 combined).

Most Elizabethan people who have children will see half of them die before they reach adulthood – if the parents themselves live long enough. Smallpox, malaria, tuberculosis and innumerable other diseases are rife and uncontrollable. Every family clutches at its Bible in fear of God's fatal judgement – all too often there is nothing else to cling to.

As if fear of death from disease were not enough, people live with fear of incrimination. At first, the break from the Catholic church leads to moderate restrictions on Catholics, but rebellions and plots against the queen mean that things rapidly deteriorate.

After the pope's excommunication and 'deposition' of Elizabeth I in 1570, it behoves every Catholic in England to try to overthrow her rule. A wave of state persecution ensues, followed by a second, more bloody wave after the coming of the Jesuits in 1580 and further anti-Catholic legislation after the Armada (1588).

By the end of Elizabeth's reign, hearing Mass is a sufficient crime to warrant you being fined £133, while not attending church for a month will lead to a period of imprisonment. People are watching you all the time. You have to be careful what you say and do in public – and even when among the servants in your own home.

This ever-present, deep-seated unease with your fellow men and women might

GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN



trouble you just as much as the lack of food and the prospect of dying from a fatal disease. If someone sees a person of the opposite sex enter your house after dark, they might report you to the authorities, suspicious that you are committing adultery. Then it is down to you to provide compurgators to prove your innocence. If you do not, you will lose your good

You have to watch what you say and do in public – and even when among the servants in your own home

reputation, be humiliated in front of the community, and may find yourself shunned thereafter.

People might report you simply out of envy or malice. This is especially the case with witchcraft: if someone's child dies and that person has a grudge against you, he or she might blame the death on your necromancy, especially if you are a woman. Such accusations can end up with you on the gallows, swinging with a rope round your neck. It does not matter that witchcraft is mere superstition; people are still terrified of it – as they are terrified of death, invasion and harvest failure. What is more, the law is on their side. After 1563, witchcraft is officially recognised as a means of killing people.

All in all, the late 16th century might be a golden age of literature, exploration, scientific discovery and architecture – but, when you consider the sensations that Elizabethan people experience every day, dark shadows appear in the golden glow.

You might say that that makes the great achievements all the more remarkable. But you might also conclude that, when we look at ourselves in the mirror of the past, we see many different aspects of humanity, and have a different insight into what we really are.

**Dr Ian Mortimer** is the author of 12 books and many articles on English history. He also writes fiction, publishing three of his novels under the name James Forrester

#### DISCOVER MORE

#### воок

► The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England by Ian Mortimer (The Bodley Head, 2012)



# The Clark Side of Side than Life

The Elizabethan era is often painted as a golden age. Yet, says **James Sharpe**, for many thousands of people life was far from golden, blighted by violence, vagrancy and crushing hunger



A woodcut shows an idyllic harvesting scene from the 1600s. In the previous century, though, the 'Merrie England' of Elizabeth I had been blighted by disastrous crop failures

#### Elizabethan lives / Hardship and hunger



nterest in Elizabeth I and her reign seems limitless, and invariably suffused with admiration – an attitude epitomised in *The Times* of 24 March 2003, on the quatercentenary of the queen's death: "Tolerance found a patron and religion its balance, seas were navigated and an empire embarked upon and a small nation defended itself against larger enemies and found a voice and a purpose... Something in her reign taught us what our country is, and why it matters. And as her reign came to craft a sense of national identity that had not been found before, so she came to embody our best selves: courageous, independent, eccentric, amusing, capricious and reasonable, when reason was all. The greatest prince this country has produced was a prince in skirts."

In an ICM poll for *Microsoft Encarta* at the same time, 55 per cent of respondents thought that Elizabeth had introduced new foods, notably curry, into Britain, and one in 10 credited her with bringing corgis to our shores.

More soberly, in 2002 Elizabeth was one of just two women (the other was Princess Diana) in BBC Two's list of '10 Greatest Britons'. Books, films, newspaper articles and plays have all played their part in polishing the Virgin Queen's reputation. There have been many biographies (about one a year from 1927 to 1957), countless novels, and Edward German's 1902

operetta Merrie England, whose very title tells us what Elizabethan England was apparently like. More recently the Michael Hirst/Shekhar Kapur Elizabeth movies concluded that, under Elizabeth, England became the most prosperous and powerful nation in Europe.

#### Social breakdown

However, not everyone who actually lived through the Elizabethan era was quite so convinced that they were experiencing a golden age. Take Edward Hext, an experienced Somerset justice of the peace, who on 25 September 1596 wrote to Lord Burghley predicting imminent social breakdown in the county. Hext reported that thefts were prevalent, most of them carried out by criminal vagrants who would rather steal than work. He also complained that there had been food riots, with rioters declaring that

Elizabethan England was on the edge of a major social crisis.

The harvests of 1594 and 1595 were bad, but 1596 was disastrous

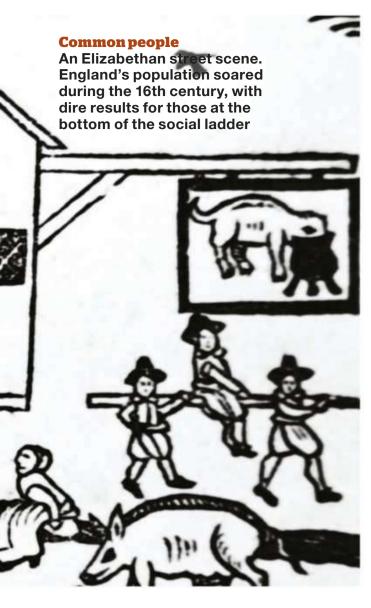
"they must not starve, they will not starve". Class hatred was manifest, he wrote, with the poor saying that "the rich men have gotten all into their hands and will starve the poor".

Hext was not, it seems, a lone doom merchant. On 28 September 1596 we find William Lambarde, another veteran justice of the peace, telling the Kent quarter sessions at Maidstone that those in authority needed to act swiftly – or the countryside would erupt.

This wasn't merely a case of two old men romanticising the 'good old days'. Hext and Lambarde knew they were on the edge of a major social crisis. The harvests of 1594 and 1595 were bad enough, but 1596 was disastrous, sending grain prices rocketing to their highest levels in the 16th century, with grim consequences for thousands.

This crisis has rarely featured in popular accounts of Elizabeth's reign. Yet it not only provides an alternative perspective on what life was like for ordinary men and women in the 16th century, far from the glittering court of the Virgin Queen, but also deepens our understanding of how the regime functioned.

At the heart of the problems confronting Elizabethan England was the challenge of feeding its soaring population. In 1500 there were about 2.5 million people in England. By 1650, that number had soared to more than 5 million— and the economy simply couldn't keep up. This problem manifested itself particularly in two ways. First, the price of grain rose disproportionately: whereas the population of England



more or less doubled between 1500 and 1650, the cost of grain – wheat, rye, barley, oats – increased sixfold. This had grave implications, because a large (and increasing) proportion of the population depended on bread, or bread-grain, bought in the market.

Second, real wages – the purchasing power of a day's pay – failed to keep up with prices. Whereas the price of grain rose by a factor of six, an average day's pay did little more than double. And, of course, given the glut of labourers, the chances of finding work, even at reduced levels of pay, diminished. Few people were wage earners in the modern sense, but most of the poor were dependent on waged work for a proportion of their income. The declining buying power of real wages pushed many into acute misery.

As a result, the Elizabethan period witnessed the emergence of poverty on a new scale. By the 1590s, the lot of the poor and the labouring classes was bad enough at the best of times. What made it worse was harvest failure. The steady upward progress of grain prices was exacerbated by years of dearth, and the shortages of 1594–97 were remarkable for the misery that was engendered.

Yet for a prosperous yeoman farmer with a surplus of grain to sell, bad harvests could be a blessing: you had enough grain to feed your family, and enjoyed enhanced profits from the grain you took to market. In contrast, if you were a middling peasant, normally termed a 'husband-

300 Londoners,
marching north to
embark for war
service in Ireland,
mutinied at
Towcester, elected
a leader and took
over the town

man', your position would be badly squeezed by harvest failure. Families in this stratum desperately tried to maintain their status until their inability to meet mounting debts or some personal disaster sent them down to the labouring poor. As a result, by 1600 many villages in the English south and Midlands were becoming polarised between a rich and locally powerful class of yeoman farmers and a mass of poor people.

The impact of failed harvests on local society is illustrated vividly by the parish registers for Kendal in Westmorland.

These record that, following the disastrous harvest of 1596, just fewer than 50 parishioners were buried in December that year – compared with a monthly average of just 20 in 1595. The death toll remained high throughout 1597, peaking at 70 in a particularly grim March.

London also suffered badly. Here, an average year would see burials running at a slightly higher level than baptisms (the early modern capital's formidable population increase was largely fuelled by immigration). Yet there was, it seems, nothing average about 1597; in that year, around twice as many Londoners were buried as baptised – and the seasonal pattern of the burials indicates that famine was the cause.

No segment of England's population was more terrifyingly vulnerable to high grain prices than prisoners awaiting trial in its county jails. The basic provision for feeding them was bread paid for by a county rate – a rate that did not increase in line with grain prices. The results were predictably catastrophic. We know of 12 coroners' inquests on the deaths of prisoners who perished in Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex county jails in 1595 – and 33 in 1596. In 1597, that rocketed to 117. Some of these deaths resulted from starvation and many famine-induced

maladies: the Elizabethan jail was an extremely efficient incubator of disease.

### **Burden of warfare**

The social dislocation caused by the bad harvests of the 1590s was exacerbated by warfare. England was continually at war between 1585 and Elizabeth's death in 1603 – in the Netherlands in support of the Dutch Revolt; in Normandy and Brittany in support of French Protestants in that country's wars of religion; on the high seas against the Spanish; and, most draining of all, in Ireland.

Conflict was costly – the government spent £5.5m on war between 1585 and 1603, much of it funded by taxpayers – but not particularly successful. It also involved the raising of large numbers of soldiers. Kent, a strategically important county, contributed 6,000 troops from a population of 130,000 between 1591 and 1602.

Some towns where troops were concentrated saw serious unrest. Soldiers at Chester, the prime embarkation port for Ireland, mutinied in 1594, 1596 and 1600. The first of these episodes, in which the 1,500 soldiers billeted in and around the city "daily fought and quarrelled", was suppressed only when the mayor of Chester declared martial law, set up a gibbet and hanged three men identified as ringleaders.

In 1598, 300 Londoners marching north to embark for war service in Ireland mutinied at Towcester, elected a leader and took over the town. Soldiers were normally recruited from the rougher elements of society, and the experience of soldiering in late 16th-century conditions did little to soften them. As a result, soldiers returning from wars tended to join the ranks of vagrant criminals.

The crisis elicited a variety of reactions from those disadvantaged by it. One was to complain, which led to prosecutions for seditious words. In March 1598, Henry Danyell of Ash in Kent declared that "he hoped to see such war in this realm as to afflict the rich men of this country to requite their hardness of heart towards the poor", and that "the Spanish were better than the people of this land and therefore he had rather they were here than the rich men of the country".

His were isolated sentiments, perhaps – but even so it is interesting that some inhabitants of 'Merrie England' were advocating class warfare and support for the nation's enemies.

### Resorting to crime

Theft was another remedy. Crime records from Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex suggest that there was a massive rise in property offences (larceny, burglary, house-breaking and robbery) – from an average of around 250 a year in the early 1590s to about 430 in 1598. Hard times were clearly encouraging the poor to steal, even though most of the offences were capital. Indeed, records suggest that more than 100 people were executed for property crimes in these five counties in 1598.

Another reaction to high grain prices was a rash of grain riots across southern England. The 'riot', at least in its early stages, had much of the character of a demonstration, and the objectives were limited to controlling prices in the local market or preventing the export of grain from their area; there is little evidence of grain rioters envisaging what would today be called social revolution.

The one incident for which we know such an outcome was envisaged was a complete failure. This was the Oxfordshire Rising of 1596 when, following unsuccessful petitioning by the poor of the county authorities, five men began to formulate plans to lead a revolt. When the ringleaders met on Enslow Hill in the north of the county to spearhead their revolution, they found that nobody had turned out to join them. And so the men made their way home – only to be arrested. Following their interrogation and torture, two were hanged, drawn and quartered on the very hill on which their projected rising was supposed to begin, and the three others disappear from the historical record, presumably having died in prison.

This crisis of the 1590s illuminates serious tensions in Elizabethan society far removed from the stereotypes of Gloriana's triumphant reign. But it also, perhaps surprisingly, demonstrates the regime's durability. People might complain; they might steal; they might participate in local grain riots. But, as the Oxfordshire Rising demonstrates, the chances of getting a large-scale popular revolt off the ground were seriously limited.

But why? The answer comes in two parts. First of all, over the Tudor period England's county and town administrations established much closer links with central authority in the shape of the Privy Council (the body of advisors to the queen). They were learning the importance of working together to ensure the smooth running of government.

The second half of the answer is provided by the increasing social polarisation that accompanied Elizabeth's reign. In 1549, the Midlands and south of England were rocked by a large-scale popular revolt led



**Thepoor become poorer** A rich man spurns a beggar in a woodcut of 1566. During the Elizabethan period, poor harvests and the burden of warfare helped create more vagrants

People might steal, complain or even participate in local grain riots, but the chances of getting a large-scale popular revolt off the ground were seriously limited

by wealthy farmers and other notables – the natural leaders of village society.

Over the following half a century, with the divide between rich and poor steadily growing, these same village leaders – the group from which parish constables, churchwardens and poor-law officials were drawn – began to regard controlling the poor as a major part of parish government. They increasingly saw themselves as stakeholders in, rather than sworn opponents of, the Elizabethan regime.

But though they contained the crisis of the 1590s, government officials at all levels must have been painfully aware of the strain it imposed. When parliament met in October 1597, many of the county members would have had experience of interrogating thieves, placating rioters and

fixing grain prices in their local markets, and many borough MPs would have been very aware of the pressure put on their towns' poor relief systems.

And it was that pressure that produced the one major, concrete legacy of the crisis – the near-comprehensive Poor Law Act of 1598, rounded off by further legislation in 1601. It may be more prosaic perhaps than Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world or the defeat of the Armada, but this piece of legislation has to rank among the defining achievements of Elizabeth's reign.

The two acts provided for a nationally legislated yet locally administered poorrelief system that was in advance of anything then existing in a state of England's size. They comprised arguably the much-feted Elizabethan Age's most important legacy to later generations, and were inspired by the horrors of those harvest failures from 1594 to 1597. Perhaps the poor – who during those years resorted to theft, were reduced to vagrancy, rioted or were indicted for seditious words – had achieved something after all.

**James Sharpe** is professor emeritus of early modern history at the University of York, and author of *A Fiery & Furious People: A History of Violence in England* (Random House, 2016)

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### воок

► Early Modern England: A Social History 1550–1760 by James Sharpe (Bloomsbury, 1997)

## GREAT PALACES

### OF ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

**Tracy Borman** tours six of the Tudor era's finest palaces and halls - and reveals the secrets of these architectural marvels



BBC History Magazine





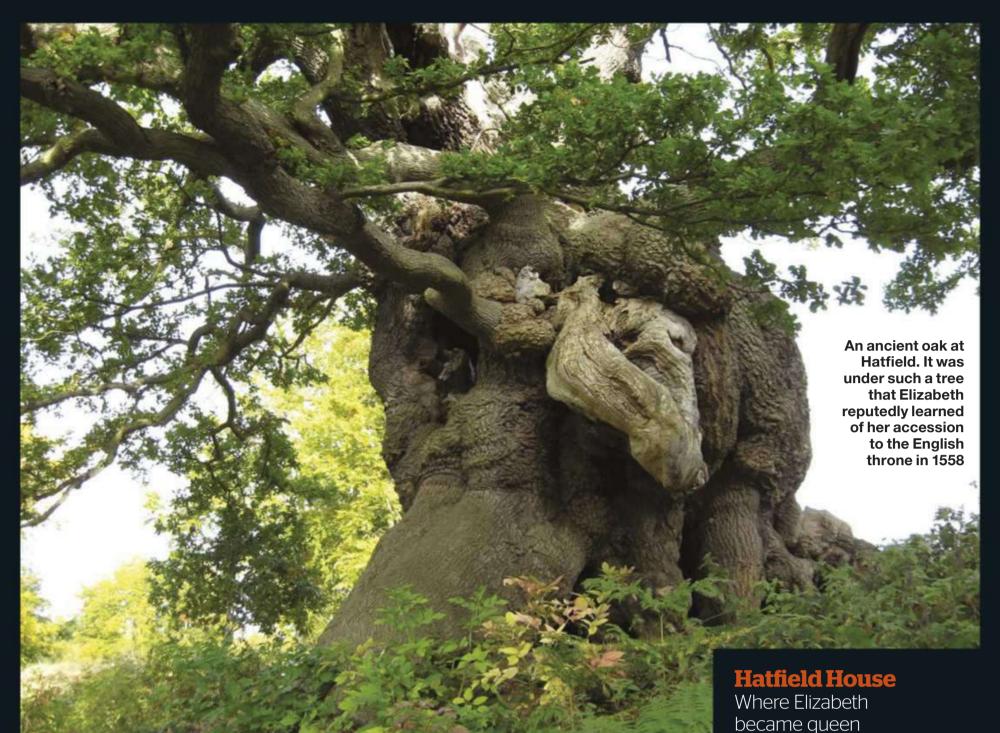
### **Hardwick Hall**

A rival's triumph

**Built for the indomitable Elizabeth** of Shrewsbury ('Bess of Hardwick'), the new hall at Hardwick, near Chesterfield in Derbyshire, was completed in 1597. It was no ordinary country residence but a new style of 'prodigy house' rivalling Queen Elizabeth's palaces in scale and magnificence. Each of the three main storeys was taller than the one below, and there were so many windows that it inspired the rhyme "Hardwick Hall, more glass than wall". The most striking element, though, was the use of Bess's initials 'ES' crowning each of the six towers, surmounted by a countess's coronet - a stridently self-confident statement by one of the queen's greatest rivals. nationaltrust.org.uk/hardwick-hall



TY IMAGES/AWL IMAGES/ALAMY





Elizabeth moved to Hatfield in Hertfordshire, 20 miles north of London, at the age of just three months. Accompanied by a sizeable household, she spent much of her turbulent childhood there, receiving occasional visits from her mother, Anne Boleyn, and father, Henry VIII. Elizabeth was at Hatfield when she learned of her accession on the death of her half-sister Mary I in November 1558 – according to legend, she was sitting under an oak tree when she heard the news. "This is the Lord's doing," she proclaimed. "It is marvellous in our eyes." The oak tree still stands in the park today, though much of the Old Palace was demolished and replaced with a newer hall by Robert Cecil, Elizabeth's last Lord Privy Seal, who took ownership in 1607. hatfield-house.co.uk

### **Elizabethan lives / Magnificent homes**

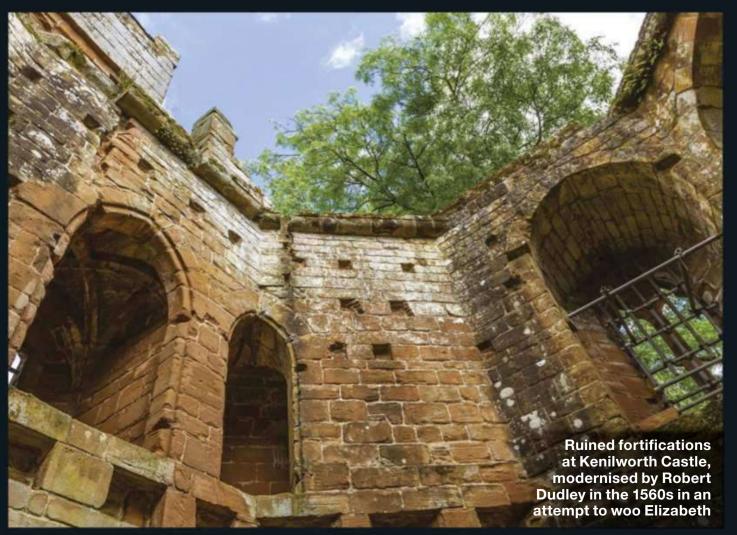
during the later years of her reign. Originally built in the 14th century, the

beautiful moated manor house was

remodelled around 1580 and boasts

the finest collection of secret priest holes in the country – seven of them,





under constant threat of assassination by her Catholic subjects. The

priests who sheltered at Harvington and elsewhere would have paid with

harvingtonhall.com

their lives if they had been discovered.

### **Kenilworth Castle**

Where the queen was wooed

Elizabeth's greatest favourite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was granted Kenilworth Castle near Coventry in 1563, and immediately began modernising it in an attempt to entice the queen to add it to the itinerary of one of her regular progresses around the country. Elizabeth's most famous visit took place in 1575, when Leicester pulled out all the stops in a final attempt to convince her to marry him. No expense was spared during 19 days of spectacular entertainments, which included pageants, fireworks, bear-baiting, mystery plays, hunting and sumptuous banquets. It was said to have almost bankrupted the queen's favourite - but all in vain. The castle was largely dismantled during and just after the Civil War.

english-heritage.org.uk/visit/ places/kenilworth-castle



Jonson as "proud, ambitious heaps",

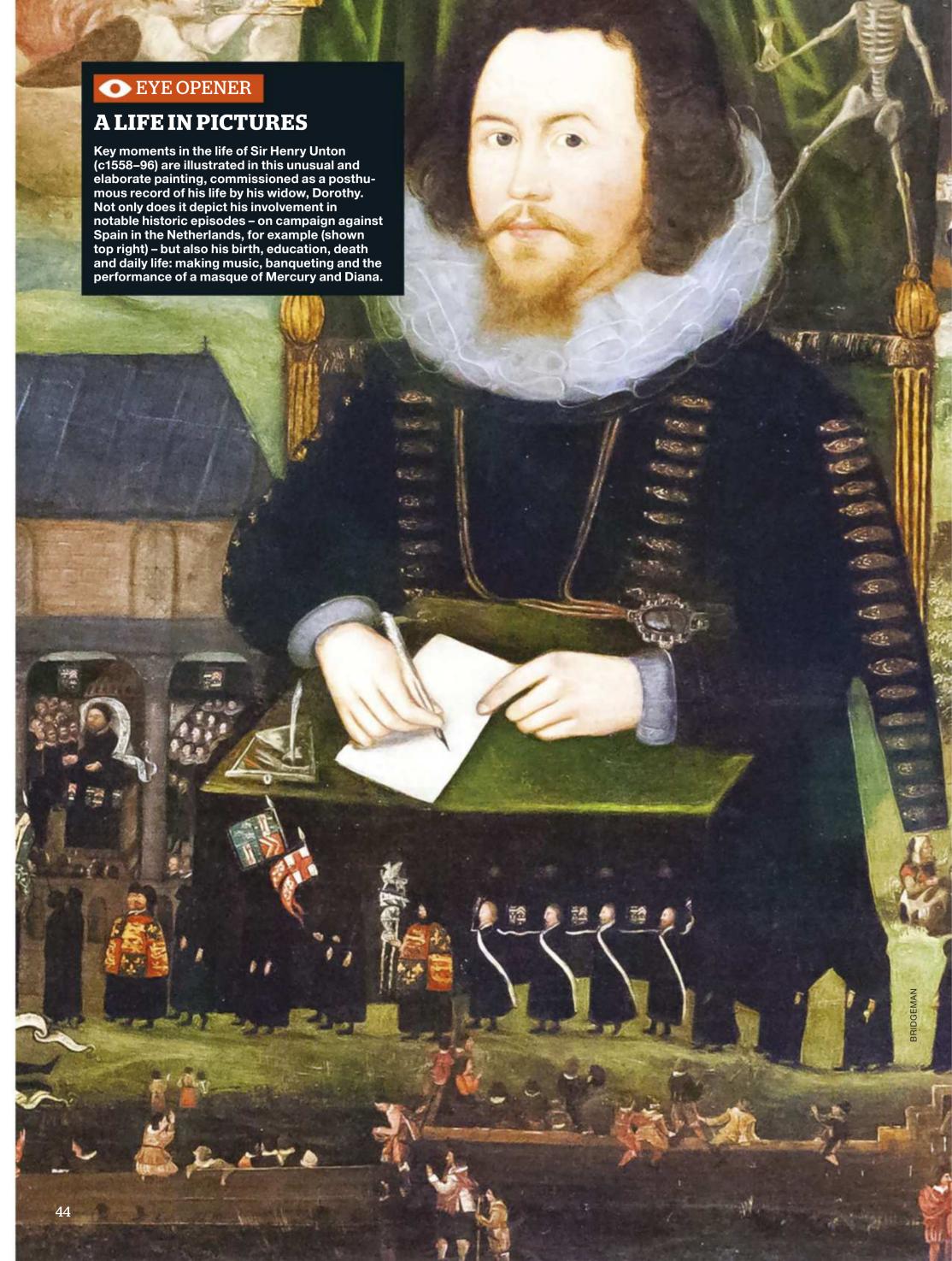
built to impress. Though now empty and partly roofless, this vast mansion

heyday

43

Women: The Hidden Story of the Virgin

Queen (Jonathan Cape, 2009)







### \* Personal politics in Elizabeth's court

Why the queen controlled her courtiers' love lives

### \* How Lettice Knollys stole the queen's sweetheart

The true story of a Tudor love triangle

### \* The unfathomable queen

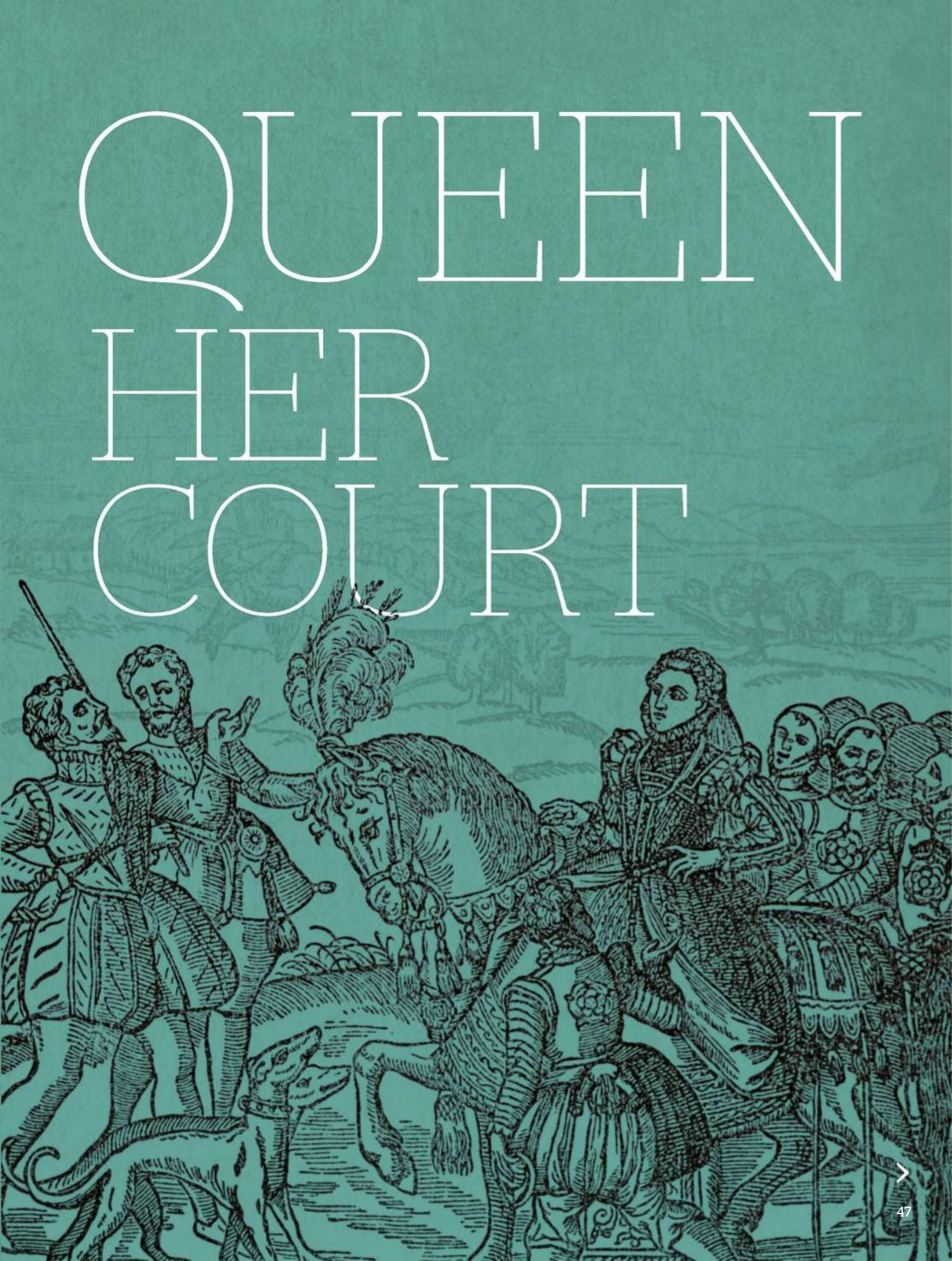
Explore the emotions behind the monarch's inscrutable mask

### **\* The Queen's Day**

Experience the spectacle of the annual accession day celebrations

### **\* The three-week wedding proposal**

How Robert Dudley wooed the queen with 'princely pleasures'





Queen Elizabeth receives Dutch ambassadors in a contemporary painting. Her court was strictly controlled at both an official and personal level – to the extent that she demanded the power of veto over the love lives of the men and women who served her

### PERSONAL POLITICS IN ELIZABETH'S COURT

The Virgin Queen's possessive treatment of her favourite advisors and maids of honour was driven more by political motives than by petty jealousy

**By Susan Doran** 

n the summer of 1592, Elizabeth I's captain of the guard, Sir Walter Ralegh, and her maid of honour, Bess Throckmorton, were committed to the Tower of London after the queen was told of their clandestine marriage and the birth of their baby boy. This was neither the first nor the last time that Elizabeth punished her

courtiers for marrying in secret, but the penalty in their case was among the most severe. Though released after a few months, Ralegh lost his offices, was banished from court, and waited five years before the queen consented to speak to him again. Bess remained imprisoned until the end of the year and was permanently excluded from the court.

In October 1599, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex – another royal intimate – was placed under house arrest after storming unannounced into the queen's bedchamber while she was still in her night clothes, minus her wig and heavy make-up. Essex was seeking to explain to her why he had failed to suppress rebellion in Ireland, but Elizabeth was unimpressed; she ordered his detention and refused to see him, despite his many appeals over the next year or so. Stripped of his offices and lucrative royal patents, the desperate earl took to the streets of London in February 1601 with the intention of forcing his presence on the queen, or possibly mounting a palace coup. A second leader of the rising was his friend Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, another courtier who had lost the queen's favour after marrying a maid of honour. Both earls were charged with treason. Southampton was reprieved; Essex died on the scaffold.

The queen's treatment of these men is usually regarded as grossly unfair. In the instances of Ralegh and Southampton, popular media present Elizabeth as guilty of petty spite against male courtiers who failed to give her the sole adoration that she craved, and of sexual jealousy towards the young, pretty maids of honour who proved successful rivals for her favourites' attention. As for

Essex, he is often portrayed as a tragic figure who for years had been forced to dance attendance on the queen when he would have much preferred to fight in England's wars, and who fatally believed that their personal intimacy gave him the right to enter her private apartments without leave.

In this narrative, Elizabeth comes off very badly. Writers sympathetic to Essex see her as unreasonable in depriving him of his liberty and offices, and even the earl's detractors criticise the queen for her absurd infatuation with a many enough to be her grandson. Her failure to rein him in on many earlier occasions, they claim, left him feeling free to disregard royal orders in Ireland and break court protocol on his return. A headline in the *Daily Mail*, advertising AN Wilson's book The Elizabethans, said it all: "Elizabeth I and the men she loved: how the queen gave an Essex toyboy her heart, then lopped off his head."

In all these works, the relationships between Elizabeth and her courtiers – both male and female – are seen in largely personal terms. Whether displaying affection or anger, Elizabeth is characterised as reacting emotionally as a private person rather than a public figure. The same kind of analysis predominates when the queen's other relationships are described. So, for example, we learn in many histories that Elizabeth was deeply jealous of Mary, Queen of Scots; hated and treated cruelly her cousins Katherine and Mary Grey; and flew into rages when slighted by her councillors.

While not denying that Elizabeth experienced strong emotions at times, I believe that the queen had no private life. As she well knew, all her utterances and doings took place on a public stage and, consequently, had a political purpose and were expected to conform to political norms. Only very rarely did Elizabeth behave otherwise, most notably when she fell in love with Robert Dudley at the outset of her reign. Customarily, when interacting with her kin, courtiers, or councillors, she operated at a political level, even when her conduct appeared personal. For all 16th-century monarchs – not just Elizabeth – the personal was always political.

This can best be appreciated when considering Elizabeth's relationships with her so-called favourites. Mistakenly, it is often

stated that the queen promoted Dudley (later Earl of Leicester), Christopher Hatton, Ralegh and Essex simply because of their good looks, fine physiques and superficial charm. In these ac-

> counts, Elizabeth has a weakness for men with sex appeal. Certainly, her favourites were handsome, dashing and athletic, but such attributes were essential for courtiers who were to act as a master of the horse, a gentleman pensioner or an esquire of the body, their first positions at court. Even so, their rise to power was not the result of the queen falling for their good looks.

Elizabeth's cousin Katherine Grey with her son, Edward Seymour. Her marriage to the Earl of Hertford landed her in the Tower of London

### Despite rumours to the contrary, it is highly unlikely that Elizabeth had a sexual relationship with any of her favourites. She was far too shrewd and cautious to risk discovery or pregnancy



Bess Throckmorton felt Elizabeth I's full fury after secretly marrying Walter Ralegh. The queen's maid of honour was thrown into prison and permanently excluded from court

Dudley and Essex came from families that the queen wished to promote for political reasons, while Hatton and Ralegh had influential patrons who brought them to the queen's notice. All four men later became close to the queen because they were excellent courtiers, entertaining her with their dancing, card playing, jousting, witty exchanges and cultured conversation. They also brought glamour to the court, not only in their own persons but also by hosting magnificent feasts for foreign visitors and arranging exciting entertainments and tournaments that impressed foreigners and English guests alike.

In this way they were instrumental in helping Elizabeth's court gain international prestige and recognition. In other ways, too, they used their positions and money in the service of the crown, financing and managing spies, privateering expeditions and military campaigns. All four men were intelligent and able. By the time Dudley, Hatton and Essex were promoted to the privy council, they had already carried out successful

political apprenticeships as administrators or soldiers, and as unofficial advisers.

It is highly unlikely that Elizabeth had a sexual relationship with any of her favourites; she was too shrewd and cautious to risk discovery or pregnancy. Besides, to safeguard her sexual reputation, Elizabeth always had at least one of her privy chamber women present in her company and sleeping in her bedchamber, and no gossip slandering the queen came from their quarter.

Nonetheless, there was a semi-erotic and flirtatious quality that marked the queen's relation ships with many of her male courtiers: she and they exploited the language and coded behaviour associated with courtly love and

A c1560 portrait of Robert Dudley who, it seems, was the only man to capture the queen's heart the chivalric discourse of the late 16th century. Elizabeth would exchange personal gifts and share private jokes with favoured courtiers; she addressed them affectionately, often by particular nicknames; she allowed them, or their representatives, easy access into her privy apartments, and would visit their homes or offer them her physician during periods of sickness.

Such displays of intimacy signified to the political world that these courtiers were especially close to the queen, and raised their status as men of influence and patronage. On their side, Elizabeth's courtiers expressed a love and adulation for the queen in letters and poems that to today's readers appear genuinely romantic or erotic but were, at the time, understood to be written in the highly stylised language of courtly love. Elizabeth did not demand such declarations to satisfy her personal vanity; their purpose was to create and strengthen the bonds of loyalty and service of elite men to a female monarch without eroding their masculinity.

> hen angered, Elizabeth also performed within the conventions of courtly love by distancing herself from those who had caused offence, expressing her ire and withdrawing her affection. This often happened when her intimates wed, especially when they did so with-

out her consent. Perhaps it was to avoid the queen's displeasure that Hatton chose not to marry. In the case of Essex, the queen's annoyance did not last long, even though she considered his bride - the widow of Sir Philip Sidney and daughter of Sir Francis Walsingham – a socially unsuitable match for a nobleman. But Leicester never fully regained the queen's trust after his secret marriage to Lettice Knollys. This, however, was a special circumstance – the earl had long pursued Elizabeth's hand in marriage, the last time just a few years prior to his secret wedding. He had also kept his marriage to Lettice quiet for as long as he could.

(See the following feature for more on this episode).

Ralegh had gone even further in deceiving the queen. When Sir Robert Cecil, the acting principal secretary, questioned Ralegh about their relationship, he had denied that he and Bess were married, while his wife had lived in close proximity to the queen, pretending to be still single, hiding her pregnancy, and slipping away to deliver the child. For Elizabeth, their dishonesty came close to sedition, and their punishment was intended as a warning to

> maids of honour who might follow Bess's example. Other maids did follow suit – and they were, likewise, severely punished. Two years after the Ralegh scandal, Bridget Manners (daughter of the 4th Earl and Countess of Rutland) also married without royal permission. Elizabeth had



### Essex fell from power not because Elizabeth saw sense and was shaken out of her infatuation with her unreliable 'toyboy', but because he badly overplayed his hand in a political power struggle

given her a month's leave from court because the girl was said to have caught the measles and needed to recuperate at home. Bridget, though, did not return, preferring life with her husband. When the queen learned the truth, she was furious with the married couple and "highly offended" with Bridget's mother, who had connived at the deception. For several months the bride was placed in the keeping of the Countess of Bedford, and her husband languished in the Tower.

The queen did not always object to courtiers' marriages, and when she did deny them permission to marry, she usually had a sound reason for doing so. Most often it was because she considered that the couple seeking marriage were of unequal status; sometimes it was because of their youth; and on a few occasions, objections to a match could be political. The union of a potential heir to the throne (such as Katherine Grey) to a man from a powerful noble family (in Katherine's case, the Earl of Hertford) held obvious political dangers. Elizabeth could also be concerned that courtiers would put their responsibilities to their new spouses before their service to their queen. For this reason, she preferred that the wives of certain courtiers were kept away from court. Those who stayed on were at all times expected to show total dedication to their queen at the expense of their family life.

Elizabeth claimed that she always furthered "any honest or honorable purposes of marriage or preferment to any of hers, when without scandal and infamy they have been orderly broken



Elizabeth I was never in love or infatuated with Essex, seen here in a contemporary portrait, argues Susan Doran

unto her". And, in general, this was true. When permission to marry had been requested and granted, the queen provided generous gifts to the brides and happily attended their weddings. She ordered a black satin gown as a wedding present for her chamberer, Dorothy Broadbelt, and she gave her maid of honour Margaret Edgecombe a pair of richly embroidered gloves. We do not know what gift another maid of honour, Frances Radcliffe, received, but we do know that the queen attended the nuptial supper, masques and dances. She also attended Anne Russell's wedding to the Earl of Warwick, which was performed in the Chapel Royal at Whitehall Palace, and the celebratory banquet and tournament that were held afterwards at court.

The queen's anger at the men and women who married without her permission soon abated, if she was especially fond of them and their fault was not judged too great. Elizabeth had delivered "blows and evil words" to her chamberer and cousin Mary Shelton on learning of her secret marriage to the gentleman pensioner John Scudamore – another unequal union. But before long the queen welcomed both back into her service and showed the couple great favour. Mary was one of her preferred sleeping companions, and also acted as a frequent intermediary for the queen, delivering messages and receiving gifts on her mistress's behalf. John was later knighted and afterwards appointed the standard-bearer of gentlemen pensioners.

et's turn now to Elizabeth's relationship with Essex. Was she really as besotted with him as is commonly believed? Undoubtedly, during his first decade at court Elizabeth bestowed upon him all the signifiers of intimacy outlined above, but she was never infatuated or in love with the earl. He was certainly not Elizabeth's sole male companion, but initially had to tolerate the equal favour she showed to Ralegh and Southampton.

Furthermore, Essex never enjoyed the full confidence and trust of the queen. She was wary of his advice to pursue an offensive war strategy, suspecting that he was too partial to the French king, Henry IV, and too ready to be reckless with royal funds. She disliked his attempts at self-aggrandisement, as when he tried to take full credit for the successes of a 1596 expedition to Cadiz. She grew irritated by his attempts to badger her into promoting his friends to positions they did not deserve. It is true that she forgave his insubordination and difficult moods too readily, but she was induced to do so by privy councillors who mediated on his behalf because they recognised the earl's worth to the state and importance to the war effort.

However, by 1599 Essex had lost his powerful mediators with the queen. With the deaths of key supporters on the council – Hatton in 1591, Sir Francis Knollys in 1596, Lord Burghley in ⋛ 1598 – Essex should have built up strong alliances with the new ₹

The queen's anger at the men and women who married without her permission soon abated, if she was especially fond of them and their fault was not judged too great



This sculpture in the grounds of Hatfield House shows Elizabeth with her courtiers. The queen's "semi-erotic" relationship with her male councillors was designed to "strengthen the bonds of loyalty and service of elite men to a female monarch"

generation of Elizabethan privy councillors. Instead he came to alienate the most influential — Sir Robert Cecil and Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham — by treating them as political enemies. By the late 1590s, Essex was convinced that they and their friends comprised a narrow cabal of evil councillors and corrupt politicians who were poisoning the queen against him. It was fear that they would present his failure in Ireland in the worst possible light — even as treason — that led the earl to dash to court in 1599 to explain his actions face to face with the queen, even though she had ordered him to stay put in Ireland. When Elizabeth consulted her councillors after her unexpected interview with the earl, unsurprisingly no one close to her spoke up for him.

Essex's political isolation at the heart of government continued until his death. He had many supporters in the army and London, but at court he had to rely on female relatives to plead for his reinstatement with the queen, and inevitably their voices were not enough. Essex fell from power not because Elizabeth saw sense and was shaken out of her infatuation with her unreliable 'toyboy', but because he badly overplayed his hand in a political power struggle that should never have happened.

Emphasising the political and public nature of Elizabeth's relationships makes them no less fascinating. On the contrary, setting them within their cultural and political contexts adds a richness and complexity to our readings of the reign. The stories surrounding the queen's relationships remain enthralling, and also provide important insights into the workings of the court and political life, especially when approached from multiple perspectives: how the queen related to her circle; how her kin, courtiers and councillors viewed and dealt with her; and how these stories were constructed by contemporaries and later historians.

**Susan Doran** is professor of early modern British history at the University of Oxford

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► Elizabeth I and her Circle by Susan Doran (OUP, 2015)

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SUPERSTOCK

# Lettice Knollys was a favourite of Elizabeth I... Then she stole the queen's sweetheart

**Nicola Tallis** tells the story of a Tudor love triangle >

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE MARQUE LONGLEAT HOUSE, WARMINSTER, WILTSHIRE/G

When Lettice Knollys (foreground) married Robert Dudley (above) without telling Elizabeth I (top), sparks flew in the Palace of Whitehall



he atmosphere within the queen's apartments at the Palace of Whitehall was icily cold when, in late 1579, Lettice Knollys stood before Queen Elizabeth. The monarch raged at the woman in front of her in no uncertain terms. "As but one sun lightened the Earth, she would have but one queen in England," Elizabeth seethed, before reputedly boxing

What could Lettice have possibly done to provoke such a volcanic reaction? She had entered into a secret marriage without the queen's consent – reason enough to provoke royal outrage. But what really fanned the flames of Elizabeth's fury was the identity of the groom: Lettice's husband was none other than the queen's favourite and one-time suitor, Robert Dudley. It was a betrayal that Elizabeth would never forgive.

Lettice's ears and banishing her from court.

### Scandalous gossip

"They say she is in love with Lord Robert and never lets him leave her." So said the Spanish ambassador, the Count de Feria, of the blossoming relationship between Elizabeth I and Robert Dudley, writing two decades earlier, in 1559. Nor was de Feria alone in his belief that relations between the queen and Dudley were far from platonic; scandalous gossip about the pair had begun to circulate soon after Elizabeth's accession the previous year.

De Feria had heard that "Her Majesty visits him in his chamber day and night". Dudley was already married to Amy Robsart, but this did nothing to quell the rumours and, when Amy died in mysterious



When Amy Robsart, Robert Dudley's first wife, died in 1560, many suspected that her husband was responsible



Robert Dudley and Elizabeth I enjoy one another's company at Kenilworth Castle, as depicted in a 17th-century painting. Their friendship set tongues wagging across Europe

circumstances (she was found dead at the bottom of a flight of stairs) in September 1560, it was whispered that Dudley had ordered her murder in order to free himself to marry the queen.

Elizabeth had known Dudley since childhood, and from the beginning of her reign she showed him great favour. He was created her Master of the Horse, and in 1564 she granted him the title Earl of Leicester. Their behaviour raised eyebrows and, though Elizabeth would later swear that nothing improper had ever passed between them, one thing is certain: Dudley was more than her favourite, and her relationship with him was arguably the most important of her life. Handsome, clever and ambitious, it was little wonder that Dudley caught the queen's eye. She herself was a tall, slim and fiercely intelligent woman – one described by the Venetian ambassador as "comely rather than handsome".

When she ascended the throne, Elizabeth – scarred by her mother, Anne Boleyn's tragic fate – publicly declared her intention to remain unmarried and a virgin. This was of little matter to the queen's advisors, and no sooner had she taken her seat on the throne than the pressure on her began to mount. Few people really believed that Elizabeth intended to remain single, and it was expected that she would marry in order to produce an heir.

Various European princes began to press their suit, but not all of those who proposed marriage were of royal blood. Following the death of his wife, Robert Dudley was a free agent. And, once the scandal surrounding Amy Robsart's death had died down, he began to present himself as a serious contender for Elizabeth's hand in marriage. Dudley had already won Elizabeth's heart, but romantic attachment was not her sole consideration. She was, after all, no ordinary woman, but Queen of England. Dudley would spend more than a decade attempting to persuade her to become his wife. At times Elizabeth seemed to consider it, toying and tormenting him as she persistently refused to give him a definitive answer. This was such a source of frustration to Dudley that, in 1565, he resorted to provoking her jealousy in order to sting her into a decision.

### The queen sees red

Described as "one of the best-looking ladies of the court", Lettice Knollys was a kinswoman of the queen, to whom she had been a "darling" in her youth. Though 10 years younger than Elizabeth, the physical similarities between the two women were striking – notably their flame red hair.

Lettice's grandmother had been the queen's aunt, Mary Boleyn, and her mother was a close companion of Elizabeth. Lettice herself had briefly served in the queen's household, and was referred to as one of her favourites. It was probably in 1561 that she married Walter Devereux, Viscount Hereford and left the court behind for leafy Staffordshire.

In the summer of 1565, Lettice was back. She was pregnant with her third child, and had travelled to London to attend her brother's wedding. Elizabeth treated Lettice generously, but that summer the queen's feelings for her kinswoman were put to the test. It was reported that Robert Dudley, now Earl of Leicester, "showed attention" to Lettice at the wedding celebrations — a very deliberate decision on Dudley's behalf. Flirting with Lettice would, he

### The countess, the courtier and the queen

The three players in the love triangle that scandalised the Tudor court

### **Lettice Knollys**

WHEN WAS SHE BORN?
On or around 6 November 1543

### **HOW DID SHE RISE TO PROMINENCE?**

Her grandmother was Elizabeth I's aunt, Mary Boleyn, and her mother was a close companion of Elizabeth. Lettice served in Elizabeth's household, where she is said to have been a favourite of the queen.

### WHO WERE HER LOVE INTERESTS?

Lettice was married three times: to Walter Devereux, who died of dysentery in 1576; to Robert Dudley; and finally to Sir Christopher Blount, who was executed in 1601 for conspiring against the queen.

### **DID SHE HAVE ANY CHILDREN?**

She had one son with Robert Dudley and five children with Walter Devereux. Of these, the most famous was Robert Devereux, who lost his head after leading the conspiracy that cost Sir Christopher Blount his life.

### WHEN DID SHE DIE? Christmas Day, 1634



### **Robert Dudley**

WHEN WAS HE BORN? In c1532

### **HOW DID HE RISE TO PROMINENCE?**

Robert was the third surviving son of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, by his wife Jane Guildford. The couple invested heavily in his education and, as a result, Robert's scholarly interests were vast. For the rest of his life he would be renowned as a patron of artists and poets.

### WHO WERE HIS LOVE INTERESTS?

Dudley married Amy Robsart in 1550 but, following her mysterious death in 1560, he remained unmarried until 1578. He dedicated much of his life to attempting, and failing, to persuade Elizabeth I to accept his hand in marriage. To the queen's great ire, Robert wed Lettice Knollys in 1578. It was a happy marriage that produced one son, Robert, Lord Denbigh, who died at the age of three.

### WHEN DID HE DIE?

On 4 September 1588, probably of malaria



### **Elizabeth I**

WHEN WAS SHE BORN? On 7 September 1533

### **HOW DID SHE RISE TO PROMINENCE?**

Elizabeth was King Henry VIII's only surviving child by Anne Boleyn. Her mother was executed before her third birthday, and as a result Elizabeth spent much of her childhood in disgrace. Her accession to the throne in 1558 (following the death of her half-sister, Mary I) marked a turning point in her life: from that moment on, she was in control of her own destiny.

### WHO WERE HER LOVE INTERESTS?

Elizabeth famously never married, despite considering (but ultimately refusing) offers from numerous foreign suitors. She formed a close and enduring bond with Robert Dudley – one that, despite her protestations that nothing untoward had occurred between the two, was the source of scandalous gossip in the English court.

### WHEN DID SHE DIE?

On 24 March 1603 at Richmond Palace



hoped, produce more than dithering indecision from the queen in response to his suit for her hand.

It achieved no such thing. All Dudley succeeded in doing was throwing Elizabeth into a jealous rage. She admonished him, we're told, for "his flirting with the viscountess in very bitter words".

As the 1560s gave way to the 1570s, the queen remained unmarried – and, to many of her courtiers, it was becoming increasingly apparent that this would remain the case. She appeared to take seriously several marriage offers from European suitors before inevitably getting cold feet, and the prospect of her accepting Dudley's overtures grew more remote with every passing year.

The realisation that the queen would not wed him came as a major blow to her

old sweetheart. He had made enormous personal sacrifices to retain her favour, and later claimed that, since the death of his first wife, he "had for a good season forborne marriage in respect of her Majesty's displeasure". In the 1570s he had, however, become embroiled in an affair

Dudley attempted to provoke the queen's jealousy by showering Lettice Knollys with attention with Lady Douglas Sheffield – one of the queen's ladies – resulting in the birth of a son, Robin Sheffield.

Lettice Knollys's life had also reached a crossroads. For several years of the 1570s, her husband, Walter Devereux, now Earl of Essex, had been engaged in a protracted military campaign to colonise Ulster. The enterprise was a disaster, and had sparked a storm of condemnation back in England. One of Devereux's fiercest critics was Robert Dudley – and so, when Devereux died of dysentery in Dublin in September 1576, whispers soon spread that he had been poisoned on Dudley's orders. The rumours were baseless but, in light of consequent events, it is unsurprising that such gossip was circulating.

In the summer of 1577, the widowed Countess of Essex spent time hunting on

### The queen and her court / Love triangle



Robert Dudley and Lettice Knollys lie side by side in St Mary's Church, Warwick. Lettice was with her husband when he died in 1588, and would outlive him by 46 years



Elizabeth, shown in the 1580s. The queen soon forgave Robert Dudley for his second marriage, and was bereft when he died

Dudley's Warwickshire estate, Kenilworth Castle. It may have been here that the seeds of a romance were sown, for that year the couple's relationship became more than platonic. Whatever the circumstances, the love affair quickly became serious, and they resolved to marry. But there was one major obstacle: the queen.

Though Elizabeth would not marry Dudley, she was still fiercely jealous of the attention her favourite showed to other women, and was determined to keep him to herself. But Lettice and Dudley were in love, and he could sacrifice his personal happiness no longer. "For the better quieting of his own conscience" he was determined to "marry with the right honourable Countess of Essex."

### Marrying into trouble

Lettice and Dudley were fully aware that by entering a marriage they risked losing the queen's favour permanently. Yet, so strong were their feelings for one another, it was a risk they were both prepared to take. Early in the morning of 21 September 1578, they were secretly married in front of just a handful of witnesses at Wanstead, Dudley's Essex home.

The couple's nuptials did not remain secret for long. Within a matter of weeks, word had started to spread. Just one question remained: how would the queen react? It was the summer of 1579 when Elizabeth became aware of Dudley's betrayal. She herself was engaged in negotiations for a potential marriage with the Duc d'Anjou, but that did not make the news any easier to swallow. She was

### Dudley was forced to retire from court in disgrace, leaving his new wife to bear the brunt of the queen's fury

so incandescent with rage that her initial reaction was to order Dudley to be sent to the Tower – a punishment he was spared thanks to the intercession of the Earl of Sussex. Nevertheless, he retired from court in disgrace, leaving his new wife to bear the brunt of the queen's fury.

Lettice was proud of her marriage – made for love – and even Elizabeth's rage could not prevent her from pretending otherwise. She was a spirited woman and, according to one hostile source, rather than meekly regretting her conduct, she now "demeaned herself like a princess". Even when the queen confronted her during the latter half of 1579 and banished her from court, Lettice showed no remorse, remaining, so we're told, "as proud as ever".

For all her anger, the queen could not bear to cut Robert Dudley out of her life altogether. He was soon back at court, where he resumed his friendship with the monarch.

Lettice enjoyed no such forgiveness. After being confronted by Elizabeth, she had little choice but to retire to the country, and would remain estranged from both queen and court until Elizabeth's death in 1603. Not even the loss of Lettice's three-year-old son by Dudley, 'the Noble Imp', in 1584 could soften the queen's heart.

### Lovers to the end

Lettice was by her husband's side at Cornbury Park in Oxfordshire when he died on 4 September 1588. Queen Elizabeth was herself devastated, fully believing that the loss was all her own. It wasn't until Christmas Day 1634, aged 91, that Lettice followed her husband to the grave. She was laid to rest beside Dudley in St Mary's Church, Warwick, where their double tomb still survives.

Even in death, Lettice's tumultuous relationship with Elizabeth was not forgotten. An epitaph, thought to have been composed by her granddaughter's husband, summarises the reason for her disgrace: "She [Lettice] was content to quit her [Elizabeth] favour for her favourite [Leicester]."

Love had won the day for Lettice Knollys – though not for Elizabeth.

**Nicola Tallis** is a historian and researcher. Her first book was *Crown of Blood: The Deadly Inheritance of Lady Jane Grey* (Michael O'Mara Books, 2016)

### DISCOVER MORE

### воок

► Elizabeth's Rival: The Tumultuous Tale of Lettice Knollys, Countess of Leicester by Nicola Tallis (Michael O'Mara Books, 2017)



lizabeth I is an icon. The Virgin Queen is more instantly recognisable even than her monstrously charismatic father,
Henry VIII. But she is also an enigma. The image of 'Gloriana' is a mask – literally so, in the 'mask of youth' portraits painted in the last two decades of her life. In these paintings, Elizabeth's unlined face remains ageless and changeless, unlike the sitter on which they were modelled. And it is a mask that was – and is – remarkably difficult to shift.

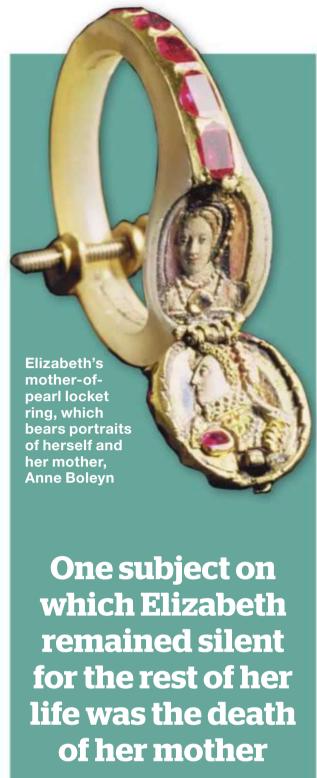
As England's sovereign, Elizabeth said a great deal. She gave speeches, and wrote letters, poems and prayers. Her comments, in public and private, were recorded by ministers, courtiers and ambassadors. But it is often difficult to be certain of what she actually meant. Her intellect is clear in every word she ever wrote or spoke. Infinitely less clear are her intentions and emotions, the tone and the sincerity or otherwise of what she said, hidden as they always were behind the carapace of a carefully constructed public self.

Her unreadability is not a trick of the historical light. Elizabeth was as unfathomable to her contemporaries as she is to posterity. As the Spanish ambassador in London wrote in 1566 – significantly, concerning the personally as well as politically fraught question of whether Elizabeth would choose to marry – "she is so nimble in her dealing and threads in and out of this business in such a way that her most intimate favourites fail to understand her, and her intentions are therefore variously interpreted". And if it was hard to be sure of her intentions when she spoke, still more challenging is the task of interpreting her silence.

### A terrible blow?

One subject on which she remained resolutely silent was the foundational event of her life. In May 1536 – when Elizabeth was not yet three – her mother, Anne Boleyn, was killed on the orders of her father. Anne was the first English noblewoman – and the first anointed queen – to die at the executioner's hand. It was a deeply shocking moment, one that left her only child facing a frighteningly unpredictable future. And for the rest of her life, at least so far as the extant sources can tell us, Elizabeth never once uttered her mother's name.

Arguments from silence are notoriously difficult to make, and historians have not found it easy to agree on the effect of this early loss. David Loades suggests that, though Elizabeth "was very aware of her



mother's fate", she "seems not to have been affected by it". David Starkey, on the other hand, sees Anne's death as "a terrible blow for Elizabeth, and her father's role in it more terrible still. But how deep the wound went we do not know...". The one immediate impact to which he points is that "the shower of lovely clothes which Anne Boleyn had lavished on her daughter suddenly dried up" — and thereafter sees Elizabeth as a young woman who inherited all "the overweening self-confidence and egotism of her house".

But there are other ways of reading Elizabeth's inscrutability in the face of her mother's loss, and other scraps of evidence to weigh in the balance. We know that she never spoke of Anne, and lionised the father who was responsible for his wife's execution. Yet, when Elizabeth secured the degree of control over her environment to make it possible, she chose to surround herself with her mother's relatives. And in her later years she owned an exquisite mother-of-pearl locket ring that opened to reveal miniature portraits of herself and

Anne. The specific sentiments behind these silent actions are impossible to elucidate but, however we interpret them, they can hardly stand as evidence that the knowledge of her mother's violent death left no mark on Elizabeth's psyche.

It is plausible, at least, to suggest that her internal psychological landscape was shaped by the kind of traumatic emotional dissonance that can produce not overweening confidence but deep-seated insecurity. Elizabeth grew up knowing that her mother had been found guilty on trumped-up charges of adultery with five men, one of them Anne's own brother, and then beheaded – all on the authority of her father.

And yet her father was the one certainty that remained, without whose approval she could not hope to flourish. As the 12-year-old Elizabeth said in the only surviving letter she wrote to Henry: "I am bound unto you as lord by the law of royal authority, as lord and father by the law of nature, and as greatest lord and matchless and most benevolent father by the divine law, and by all laws and duties I am bound unto your majesty in various and manifold ways..."

### The bastard daughter

What is certain is that Elizabeth was too young when her mother died to remember a time when her own position in the world was anything other than precarious. Before she was three she was declared illegitimate as a result of the annulment of her parents' marriage – no longer the heir to the throne, or a princess, but simply the 'Lady Elizabeth'. And there was nothing straightforward about her revised position as the king's bastard daughter. The Act of Succession of 1544 named Elizabeth and her older half-sister Mary as royal heirs to their younger half-brother Edward, while at the same time Henry continued to insist, in all other contexts, on their illegitimacy.

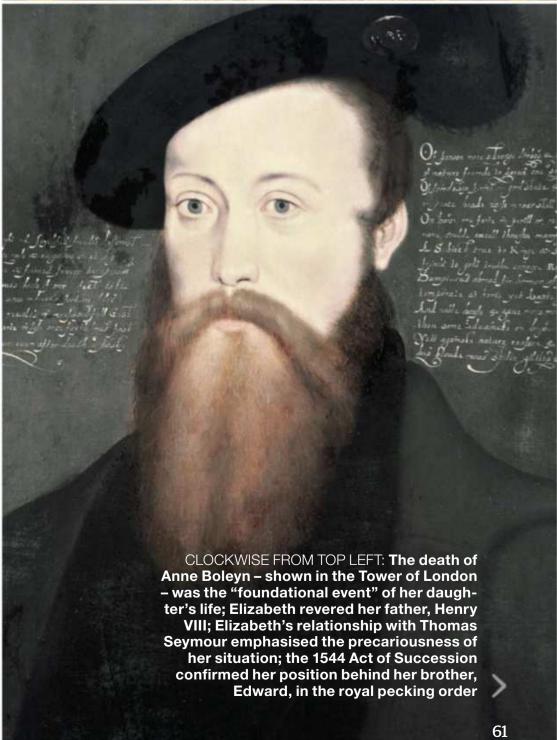
It was a contradiction that troubled their father little, but it left Elizabeth's future in political limbo. The lives of most royal women were shaped by marriage to husbands whose identities were decided by the manoeuvrings of national and international diplomacy. Elizabeth and her half-sister were pawns in this matrimonial game – but pawns whose value was hugely difficult to assess, as royal bastards who, however unlikely it seemed, might one day become queens.

Politically, Elizabeth could not anticipate the life that lay ahead of her with any degree of confidence. Meanwhile – lest her mother's fate had left her in any doubt of the physical and political dangers marriage might present – she gained and lost three stepmothers









### The queen and her court / Elizabeth's emotions

before her ninth birthday. The first, Jane Seymour, died of an infection less than a fortnight after giving birth to Henry's son. The second, Anne of Cleves, was rejected by the king before the marriage had even taken effect. And the third, Catherine Howard a teenage cousin of Elizabeth's mother - was killed in the same way as Anne, as a result of similar charges of sexual misconduct.

From the summer of 1543 a fourth stepmother, Katherine Parr, facilitated a more workable approximation of family life for the three royal siblings. But the violent riptides of politics at their father's court were never far away, and Elizabeth had neither the unique status of her brother Edward as heir to the throne to protect her nor, like half-Spanish Mary, powerful relatives on the continent to keep an eye on her welfare.

### **Dangerous daydreams**

The uncertainties of Elizabeth's position only multiplied after her father's death in January 1547. In February 1548 – now living with the widowed queen Katherine Parr and her new husband, Thomas Seymour – 14-year-old Elizabeth noted in a letter to her brother, the young King Edward, that "it is (as your majesty is not unaware) rather characteristic of my nature... not to say in words as much as I think in my mind". The significance of this instinct toward opacity was confirmed a year later when Seymour was arrested on charges of treason. It emerged that he had not only flirted indecorously with Elizabeth but, after Katherine's death in childbirth in the autumn of 1548, planned to marry her.

Elizabeth, it turned out, had not been resistant to Seymour's advances. If this was an adolescent crush on a handsome and attentive older man – a father-figure who

As a prisoner, her health was not good, and she had difficulty sleeping. **But under** interrogation, she was immovable

was not sexually out of bounds, should he ask for her hand – it is only likely to have been intensified by the fact that the prospect of marrying Seymour would spare Elizabeth the usual fate of royal daughters: to be sent abroad, in permanent exile from all that was familiar, to make a new life with a stranger for a husband. Now, however, it was suddenly evident just how dangerous such daydreams might be.

And in response Elizabeth, at only 15, brought a public mask into political play for the first time. Under interrogation, with her closest servants in custody, she remained immovable, insisting that she had not been involved in Seymour's plans, and that there had been no discussion of marriage without the explicit proviso that the consent of the privy council was paramount. "She has a very good wit," wrote the harassed Sir Robert Tirwhit, charged with extracting her confession, "and nothing is gotten off her but by great policy." In March 1549 Seymour was sent to the block; Elizabeth was left to retreat into the calm of her books. It was a formative lesson: her decision to adopt a defensible position and resist all pressure to shift her ground had saved her from clear and present danger.

Profound and enduring insecurity, both personal and political, had defined Elizabeth's environment and her experience even before she became the Protestant heir to her Catholic sister's throne after Edward's death in 1553. Within months, she found herself in the Tower of London - a prisoner, suspected of treason, in the same apartments where her mother had spent her last days. Psychological pressure found physical expression – her health was not good, and she had difficulty sleeping – but her composure, just as it had been during the Seymour affair, was impenetrable. She was innocent of conspiracy. If Mary believed otherwise, she must prove it. And the truth was that, as the Spanish ambassador admitted through gritted teeth, "there is not sufficient evidence to condemn Elizabeth".

### Hidden in plain sight

How, then, are we to understand Elizabeth as queen? Her accession to the throne in 1558, at the age of 25, brought authority and autonomy, but it did not bring safety. Already, her sharp intellect had been forged into a cautious and subtle intelligence, and her interaction with the world into a masked reactivity. Those same instincts – to watch and wait, to choose her friends carefully and her enemies more carefully still – continued to guide the new queen as the threats to her person and her kingdom mutated and multiplied.

Mercurial as she could be, difficult to read as she was, she hid in plain sight. She took up positions – on religion, marriage, counsel, diplomacy – at the start of her reign and, wherever she could, however she could, rebuffed attempts to make her move. Her ministers questioned her methods – her resistance to change, to war, to marriage, to naming an heir – but Elizabeth's ambition as monarch was consistent and coherent: to seek security through stillness; to manage the known risks of current circumstances, rather than precipitate unknown dangers through irreversible action.

The experience of insecurity, it turned out, would shape one of the most remarkable monarchs in English history.

Helen Castor is a historian, broadcaster and author. She is co-presenter of Making History on BBC Radio 4, and has presented several TV series, most recently England's Forgotten Queen on BBC Four

### DISCOVER MORE

### **BOOK**

▶ Elizabeth I: A Study in Insecurity by Helen Castor (Allen Lane, 2018)



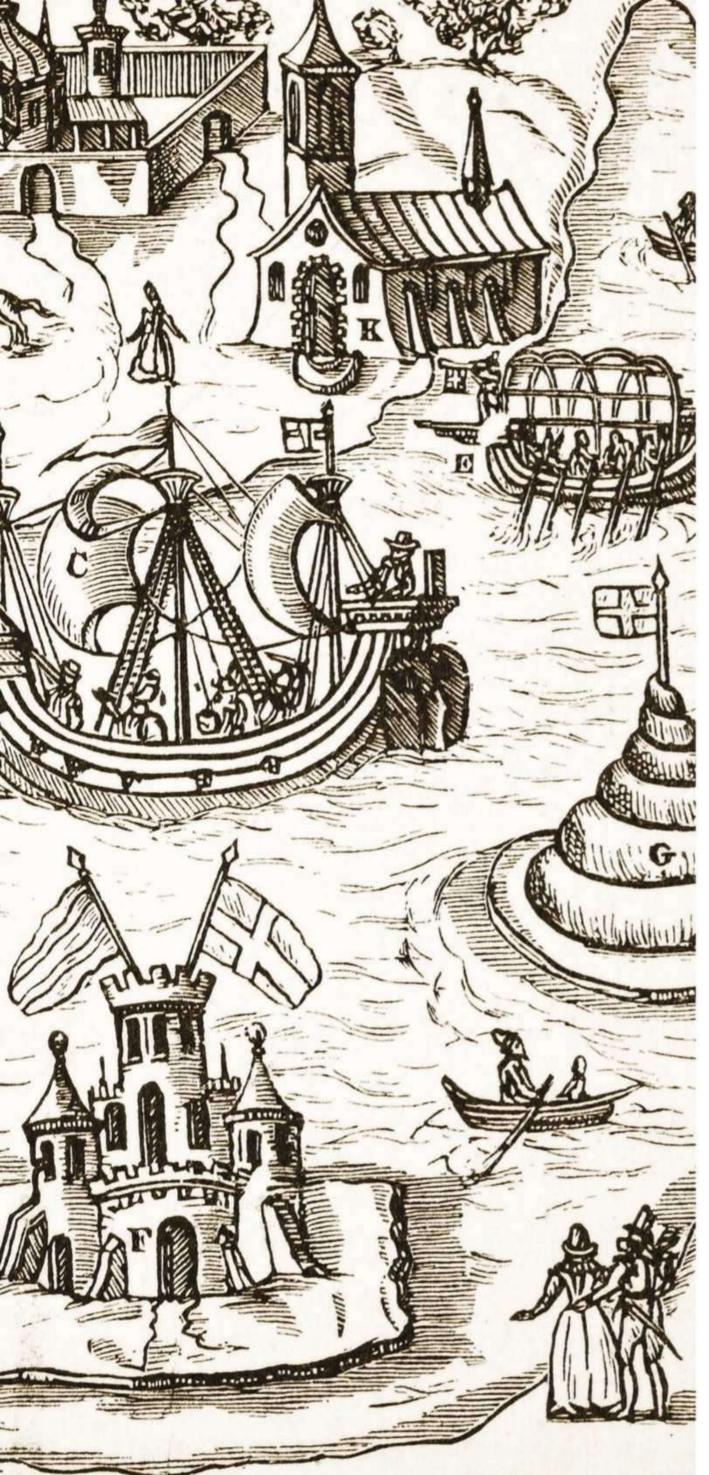
## OUEEN'S DAY



This 1570 manuscript shows Queen Elizabeth riding in a chariot, attended by Fame and a herald of arms

**Anna Whitelock** reveals how Elizabeth I used celebrations marking the anniversary of her accession as a weapon in her war against the Catholic threat to her throne





he accession day of Queen
Elizabeth II, 6 February, is
usually marked with gun
salutes at the Tower of
London and elsewhere
in the capital. The Queen
herself generally shuns
celebrations on that day, instead observing it
privately – it is, of course, also the anniversary
of the death of her father, George VI, in 1952.

The current monarch's approach is in stark contrast with that of the first Queen Elizabeth. National exigencies meant that, as her reign went on and the dangers to the realm mounted, spectacular national celebrations on 'the Queen's Day' became increasingly critical – not simply for spectacle and festivity but for security and defence.

She had come to the throne on 17 November 1558 following the death of her Catholic sister Mary I. For many of her subjects it offered the promise of a decisive break with an unpopular popish past and the dawn of a new age with a Protestant young queen.

Yet for others Elizabeth was the 'little whore' daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and the living symbol of the break with Rome. These people believed that Mary Stuart, the Queen of Scotland, was the rightful heir to the throne of England. And over the years that followed, Mary became the focus of numerous plots against Elizabeth.

### **Popular loyalty**

Twelve years after Elizabeth's accession, 17 November became the first royal anniversary to be popularly celebrated in England. It began as a spontaneous outpouring of popular loyalty following the abortive 'Rising of the North' in 1569 – a rebellion of Catholic nobles from northern England who sought to depose Elizabeth and replace her with Mary, Queen of Scots.

The first celebration is thought to have been in 1570 in Oxford, where there was bell-ringing across the city, though there is also evidence that Lambeth, the home of the archbishop of Canterbury – and, as such, a royalist stronghold – rang its bells in 1569.

Following the rebellion, and after endless rumours of Catholic plots inspired by the presence of the Scottish queen – who had fled to England in 1568 – popular feeling surged, and annual celebrations involving bell-ringing, bonfires, prayers, sermons and feasting sprang up across the country. Anxious for government favour, town officials would sponsor increasingly elaborate customary ceremonies including processions and pageants to celebrate the queen's life and reign, and to reaffirm loyalty to her.

In Liverpool in 1576 the mayor, Thomas Bavand, ordered a great bonfire to be lit in

### The queen and her court / Accession day



the market square, and gave instructions that all householders should light fires throughout the town. That evening there was a banquet, then back at his house the mayor distributed sack (fortified wine from Spain), white wine and sugar "standing all without the door, lauding and praising God for the most prosperous reign of our... most gracious sovereign".

Two years later, in York, city authorities ordered that officials should go decently apparelled to a sermon in praise of the queen "on pain of such fine as the mayor saw fit". In more puritan areas such as Essex, however, accession day was normally kept as a fast.

By the early 1580s, accession day celebrations were brought under central control as a feast day of the church. Whereas previously Catholic feast days had been the occasion of spectacular pageants and processions in celebration of the saints, now such 'holy day' festivities were used to glorify Elizabeth.

In 1576 a special service and liturgy was designed and a collection of psalms, prayers and readings published, giving thanks for the reign of the queen who had delivered the English people "from danger of war and oppression, restoring peace and true religion". Elizabeth was heralded as delivering the realm from the Catholic tyranny of Mary's reign and from the yoke of Spain that had cast a shadow over England since Mary's marriage to the Spanish king, Philip II, in 1554.

Accession day sermons lauded Elizabeth as a "learned, wise, religious, just, uncorrupt, mild, merciful and zealous prince". At a sermon at Lydd, Kent, in 1587, Isaac Colfe remarked: "Surely never did the Lord make any such day before it, neither will he make any such day after for the happiness of England."

### **Observance overseas**

Celebrations were not confined to England. On 17 November 1582 Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins were at sea, but marked accession day by shooting three pieces of ordnance. And in 1587, Puerto Seguro in the South Seas saw a discharge of ordnance, a salute and a firework display.

From 1581, the focus of the annual accession day celebrations was a spectacular tournament known as a 'tilt' held at the palace of Whitehall – a public event that, in its sheer size and splendour, was matched only by coronations and royal weddings.

Shortly before 17 November, having returned from her summer progress, the queen would make her state entry into London and retire to the palace of Whitehall ready for the tournament. The citizens of London would witness processions to and from the tiltyard, city worthies would assemble in their finery,

An impression made from the reverse of Elizabeth I's second Great Seal

'Queen's Day' began as an outpouring of public loyalty inspired by failed Catholic plots

trumpets would sound, cannons would be fired and bonfires would be set ablaze.

Leopold von Wedel, a German traveller who observed the 1584 tournament, described how the combatants would ride in disguise into the tiltyard accompanied by their servants. Before the joust they would address the queen with special verses of wit and praise. Entrants went to considerable expense to devise themes and to order armour and costumes for their followers. Von Wedel described how some of the combatants' servants were dressed as savages or Irishmen, others as women, with long hair to their girdles; "others had horses equipped like elephants, some carriages were drawn by men, others appeared to move by themselves; altogether the carriages were very odd in appearance."

This spectacle was one of the high points of the court calendar, but also an event enjoyed by thousands of Londoners. Some 12,000 people would squeeze into the tiltyard at Whitehall – now Horse Guards Parade – each paying 12d for entry to enjoy the tournament, which continued through the afternoon. It was a chance to display their loyalty, and to enjoy the spectacle and a day off work.

The accession day glorification of the queen was taken to even greater heights following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. A Catholic invasion had long been feared, but Elizabeth had triumphed, defending Protestant England against the might of Catholic Spain. In 1588, the queen rode in

triumph into the city on a symbolic chariot "imitating the ancient Romans" as musicians played and the lord mayor of London waited to greet her. At St Paul's Cathedral, banners of the vanquished Spaniards adorned the walls, and from a specially constructed closet Elizabeth heard the sermon of thanksgiving at Paul's Cross before returning by torchlight to Whitehall. Similar celebrations heralding the queen's victory were held in Nottingham, Bristol, Maidstone and in other cities across the country.

### **Self-promoting spectacle**

The most famous of the accession day tilts was that of 1595. At that tournament the queen's sometime favourite Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, not only jousted but also acted out a publicity-seeking spectacle. Though it was ostensibly designed as a public profession of loyalty to the queen, Elizabeth was, it seems, far from impressed by Essex's display, believing herself to have been marginalised by his self-promotion. She is reported to have said that "if she thought there had been so much said of her, she would not have been there that night, and so went to bed". Essex's attempt to use the public platform provided by the accession day to court the queen's favour had backfired. On her accession day, more than any other, it would not do to upstage the queen.

In the final years of the reign, with Elizabeth still unmarried, with no heir of her body and no named successor, the royal succession remained uncertain. Within and outside the court, this was a source of great anxiety for Englishmen who feared that civil war would break out on her death.

Queen's Day celebrations became firmly established across the country and were deliberately built up by the government as a great unifying national festival demonstrating loyalty to a lonely and ageing queen, and emphasising continuity and Protestant truth in the midst of continued threats. Elizabeth's accession had heralded a new dawn, deliverance from the powers of darkness, and triumph over the antichrist of Rome.

**Anna Whitelock** is a reader in early modern history at the University of London, and author of *Elizabeth's Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen's Court* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

### DISCOVER MORE

### **BOOKS**

► The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry by Roy Strong (Pimlico, 1999)

➤ The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700 by Ronald Hutton (Oxford, 1994)

## The royal sweetheart and the three-week marriage proposal





### The queen and her court / Dudley's proposal



n Saturday 9 July 1575, at about 8pm, Elizabeth I arrived on horseback at Kenilworth Castle, the Warwickshire power base of her long-time favourite

Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. As the queen passed through the castle gates, along the tiltyard and into the outer courtyard, she was met by actors reciting speeches of welcome and bearing symbolic gifts, including the keys to the castle. Trumpeters saluted her, and when Elizabeth reached the inner courtyard, dismounted her palfrey and made her way to her chamber, there was a peal of guns that could, it was said, be heard 20 miles away.

For nearly three weeks the queen, her ladies-in-waiting and leading courtiers were housed at the castle and entertained by Dudley with diversions ranging from music, masques and dancing to tilting, hunting and bear-baiting. Elaborate banquets, at which guests consumed up to 40 barrels of beer and 16 barrels of wine per day, were punctuated by fireworks displays and, on at least one occasion, the gyrations of an Italian acrobat. In the words of the French ambassador, nothing "more magnificent" had been seen in England "for a long time".

The stage upon which these splendours unfolded was Kenilworth itself: Dudley had reputedly spent £60,000 on building works in anticipation of the queen's visit. The festivities of July 1575, which became known as the 'princely pleasures', have gone down in history as the longest, most expensive party of Elizabeth's 44-year reign. These revels also constituted Dudley's last-ditch attempt – after nearly 15 years of trying – to win the queen's hand in marriage.

### **Dudley and Elizabeth**

Contemporaries described Dudley as the man who knew Elizabeth best and who exercised the greatest influence over her. The two shared many interests, including riding and hunting. But theirs was also an attraction of opposites: the queen was indecisive, Dudley impulsive. In all probability they never consummated their relationship, though there may have been a sexual component to it. Whatever the physical relationship, theirs was undoubtedly a strong and enduring emotional bond. Elizabeth's pet name for Dudley was 'eyes', and he seems to have been the only one of her many suitors whom she seriously contemplated marrying.

The pair met as children at the court of Henry VIII, perhaps as early as 1540, when emotional bond. Elizabeth's pet name for Dudley was 'eyes', and he seems to have been



An artist's impression of Kenilworth Castle at the time of Elizabeth's visit in 1575. Dudley had ordered major improvements to his property in an attempt to impress the monarch

each would have been about seven. It is unclear when exactly friendship blossomed into romance, though a turning point seems to have occurred between 1550 – when Dudley married Amy Robsart – and November 1558, when Elizabeth ascended the throne. Certainly, the new queen's decision to appoint Dudley to the position of master of the horse raised eyebrows. Not only did the post come with lodgings at court but it also – by requiring its holder to lift the queen on and off her horse – ensured regular, physical contact.

**At elaborate daily** banquets laid on at Kenilworth, guests consumed up to 40 barrels of beer and 16 barrels of wine

By spring 1559, scandalous rumours were circulating that Elizabeth was in the habit of visiting Dudley "in his chamber day and night" and, moreover, "waiting for [his wife] to die". When, a little more than a year later, Amy was found with a broken neck at the foot of a staircase, Dudley's enemies were quick to accuse him of a murderous plot designed to pave the way for marriage to the queen – and kingship in all but name. In fact, the death was almost certainly a case of misadventure (the verdict of the contemporary coroner's court) or suicide; there was no evidence of foul play, and there is reason to believe Amy was suffering from breast cancer, depression, or both.

As a widower Dudley was, in theory, free to pursue the queen's hand, but he faced opposition at court. In 1566, William Cecil advised the queen to choose the Habsburg archduke Charles – a Catholic – over Dudley, noting that Dudley's paternal grandfather had been "but a solicitor". More damning was the fact that Dudley's father, brother and sister-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, had been executed as traitors for

### Dudley's feelings for the queen found expression in the plays and paintings he commissioned

conspiring, as Edward VI lay dying, to divert the succession.

Nonetheless, Dudley was undeterred in his pursuit of Elizabeth's hand, confessing that he "could not contemplate the queen's marriage to anyone else... without great repugnance". Between 1561, when mourning for Amy ended, and 1578, when he married the (possibly pregnant) Lettice Knollys, Dowager Countess of Essex, Dudley actively wooed Elizabeth while doing his best to undermine the efforts of her foreign royal suitors. Often – as at Kenilworth in the summer of 1575 – Dudley's feelings for the queen found expression in the plays and paintings he

### **Courtship at Kenilworth**

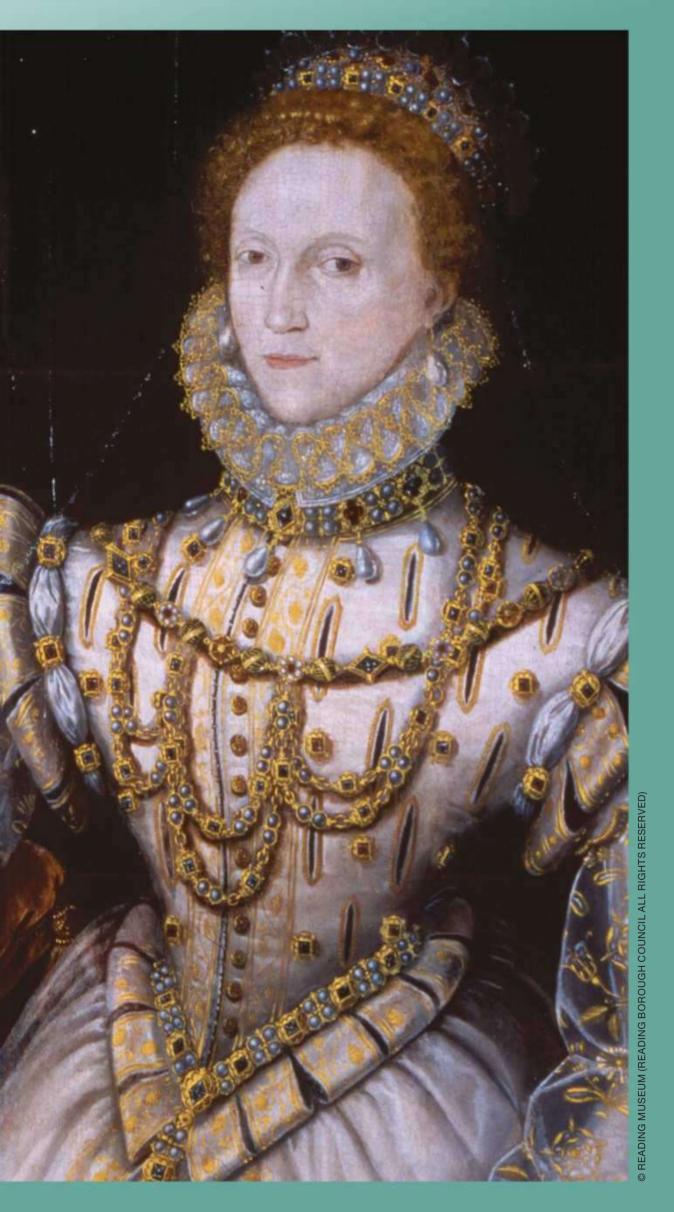
commissioned for her pleasure.

So far as can be determined, the Kenilworth festivities were designed by Dudley as an extended marriage proposal. The elaborate welcome staged for Elizabeth on 9 July 1575 set the tone, with its assertion that "The Lake, the Lodge, the Lord" were hers "for to command". Over the course of the next 18 or 19 days this message was reiterated in a succession of specially commissioned dramatic entertainments articulating Dudley's "true love", together with his desire to give "himselfe and all" to the queen.

At some point during the course of these revels Dudley seems to have unveiled two sets of life-sized portraits of himself and Elizabeth, newly commissioned for the picture collection at the castle. In one set – executed by an unidentified artist or artists – Dudley is depicted wearing a red doublet (then, as now, a colour associated with love – pictured above right), Elizabeth a jewel-encrusted white doublet that had been a gift from Dudley at New Year 1575 (pictured far right).

In the other set – executed by the celebrated Italian painter Federico Zuccaro, who travelled





### **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

A portrait of Robert Dudley, commissioned from an unknown artist shortly before Elizabeth's 1575 visit, shows him wearing rich red – the colour of love; in the companion portrait of Elizabeth, also believed to have been commissioned in 1575, she wears a white doublet given to her by Dudley; a sketch for a painting by Zuccaro shows Elizabeth with a pillar, a dog and an ermine, symbolising constancy, fidelity and purity; Dudley wears armour in Zuccaro's sketch

to England at Dudley's behest in the spring of 1575 – Dudley is depicted in armour, while the queen appears alongside a column (representing constancy) topped with a dog (fidelity) and an ermine (purity). Zuccaro's paintings do not survive, but his preliminary drawings give a sense of what the finished works must have looked like.

Significantly, in both sets of portraits Dudley and Elizabeth are shown facing the same direction rather than each other, the latter style by convention reserved for husbands and wives. But the implicit depiction of them as a couple – and of Dudley as consort manqué – is unmistakable.

Dudley's proposals of marriage culminated in a speech, delivered at the queen's departure on 27 (or possibly 28) July:

"Vouchsafe, O comely Queene, yet longer to remaine,
Or still to dwell amongst us here!
O Queene commaunde againe
This Castle and the Knight,
which keepes the same for you;
... Live here, good Queene, live here..."

By all accounts, Elizabeth left Kenilworth earlier than expected – perhaps because the weather took a turn for the worse, or perhaps because Dudley's extravagant assertions of devotion struck the wrong note when, just the previous year, he had fathered a 'base' son by the much younger Douglas Howard, Lady Sheffield.

## Abandoned hopes

After the festivities, Dudley seems to have abandoned any real hope that Elizabeth would ever agree to marry him. But that was not the end of their relationship. Queen and favourite remained close, even after Dudley's 1578 marriage to Lettice Knollys. When, in 1588, Dudley died unexpectedly, Elizabeth was so distraught that she spent several days alone in her chamber. Upon receiving a letter from him thanking her for some medicine, sent just before his death, the queen treasured it as "his last letter", keeping it in a box by her bedside until her own death over 14 years later. Dudley may not have won Elizabeth's hand, but there can be little doubt that he won her heart.

Elizabeth Goldring is honorary associate professor at the University of Warwick. Her biography of Nicholas Hilliard, favourite portrait painter of Dudley and Elizabeth, will be published by Yale University Press in 2019

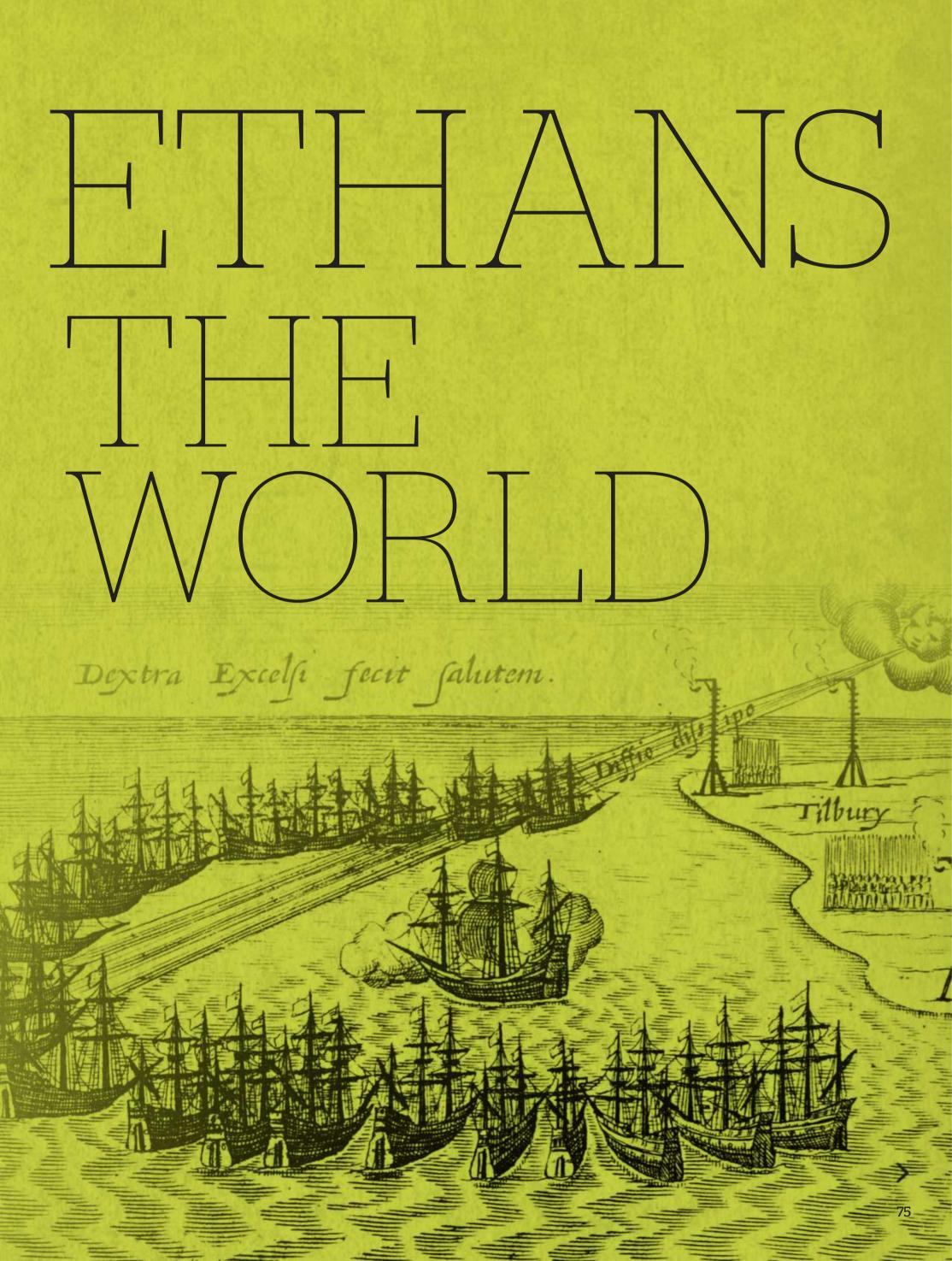
### DISCOVER MORE

# воок

► Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and the World of Elizabethan Art by Elizabeth Goldring (Yale University Press, 2014)



- **Elizabeth's war with England's Catholics**The violent persecution of priests and recusants
- **₩ Walter Ralegh: the heroic traitor**
- How the queen's one-time favourite fell from grace
- **Eight surprising facts about the Spanish Armada**Discover little-known aspects of the ill-fated invasion campaign
- **The Tudors' unlikely allies**Why Elizabethan England forged new ties with Islamic lands
- \* How exploration laid the foundation of empire
  Follow in the footsteps of Tudor pioneers in Asia and the sub-Arctic
- **Elizabeth's Irish nemesis**The earl whose audacious rebellion almost ended English rule in Ireland





# Elizabeth's war with England's Catholics

In Elizabethan England, Catholics were branded public enemies, their Masses banned and their priests executed. **Jessie Childs** reveals what life was like for recusants and 'church papists' in a hostile Protestant state



Elizabeth I expected outward obedience from her subjects – and that included their church attendance

n 1828, builders removing a lintel over a doorway at Rushton Hall in Northamptonshire were surprised to see an old, beautifully bound book come down with the rubble. They decided to investigate, and knocked through a thick partition wall, exposing a recess about 5 feet (1.5 metres) long and 15 inches (40cm) wide. Inside, wrapped in a large sheet, was an enormous bundle of papers and books that had once belonged to Sir Thomas Tresham, a Catholic gentleman who lived during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Other discoveries were made in other counties: a secret room chanced upon by a boy exploring a derelict wing of Harvington Hall, near Kidderminster, in 1894; a small wax disc bearing the imprint of a cross and a lamb (an Agnus Dei), found in a box nailed to a joist by an electrician working in the attic of Lyford Grange, Berkshire, in 1959; and a 'pedlar's chest' containing vestments, a chalice and a portable altar, bricked in at Samlesbury Hall, Lancashire. Each bears testimony to the resourcefulness and courage with which Catholic men and women tried to keep their faith in Protestant England.

Under Elizabeth I, Catholics grew adept at concealment. The Mass was banned; anyone who heard it risked a fine and prison, hence the need for secret Mass-kits and altar-stones small enough to slip into the pocket. Their priests – essential agents of sacramental grace – were outlawed. Reconciling anyone to Rome (indeed, being reconciled) was made treason. After 1585, any priest ordained abroad since 1559 and found on English soil was automatically deemed a traitor and his lay host a felon – crimes punishable by death. Hence the need for priest-holes such as the one at Harvington Hall and at Hindlip, where a feeding tube was embedded in the masonry.

Even personal devotional items such as rosary beads or the Agnus Dei found at Lyford were regarded with suspicion, since a statute of 1571 had ruled that the receipt of such 'superstitious' items, blessed by the pope or his priests, would lead to forfeiture of lands and goods.

It is impossible to know how many Catholics there were in Elizabethan England, because few were willing to be categorised and counted. John Bossy, defining a Catholic as one who habitually, though not necessarily regularly, used the services of a priest, estimated that there were some 40,000 in 1603 – less than 1 per cent of the population.

This was not a homogenous group but a wide and wavering spectrum of experience. Many were branded 'church papists': they attended official services according to law, but some conformed only occasionally or



Outlawed practices English Catholic women are arrested for attending an illegal Mass, from *Martyrology of Campion*, a 1582 engraving by Richard Verstegan

# After 1585, any priest ordained abroad since 1559 and found on English soil was automatically deemed a traitor

partially. For example, William Flamstead read his book during the sermon "in contempt of the word preached", while for two decades of attendance Sir Richard Shireburn blocked his ears with wool.

Parishioners might refuse Protestant communion, or they might hide the bread up their sleeve to dispose of later. Mrs Kath Lacy from the East Riding of Yorkshire trod it "under her foot". Other wives avoided church altogether and, since their husbands owned the property, they often escaped prosecution. "Such here have a common saying," groused one Northamptonshire official in 1599, "the unbelieving husband shall be saved by the believing wife."

At the disobedient end of the spectrum were those individuals (8,590 recorded in 1603) who staunchly adhered to the Roman church's insistence that compliance was an insult to the faith. They were known as recusants (from the Latin recusare: to refuse) and they paid a high price for their 'obstinacy'. In 1559, the fine for missing church was 12 pence. In 1581 it was raised to a crippling 20 pounds. In 1587 enforcement became much stricter, with the introduction of cumulative monthly fines and the forfeiture of two-thirds of a defaulting recusant's estate. Lord Vaux of Harrowden was reduced to pawning his parliamentary robes; poorer folk did not have that luxury.

What recusants publicly requested – freedom of worship and the right to abstain from official church services – may not sound unreasonable, but this was the age of Inquisition, Conquistadors, religious wars and, during the reign of Elizabeth's half-sister Mary I, human bonfires. Elizabeth was a divine-right queen with a sworn duty to maintain the one true faith (though, unlike Mary, she had conformed during her predecessor's reign). She did not like "to make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts", noted the oft-misquoted Francis Bacon, but she expected outward obedience, in church and state.

## Illegitimate pretender

On 25 February 1570, Pope Pius V issued a bull of excommunication against Elizabeth I. In late support of the 1569 northern rebellion (led by the Catholic earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, and crushed with ruthless efficiency – 450 executions under martial law is the conservative estimate), the bull declared Elizabeth an illegitimate pretender and bound her subjects to disobey her, upon pain of anathema (a formal curse by the pope).

A later resolution from Pius's successor, Gregory XIII, allowing for provisional obedience "under present circumstances", did not alter the fundamental message. It was impossible, wrote Privy Council clerk Robert Beale, "that they should love her, whose religion founded in the pope's authority maketh her birth and title unlawful".

There was, indeed, some rancour towards the queen. In 1591, the recusant gentleman Swithin Wells retorted to a jibe about papists having been begotten by bulls with the words: "If we have bulls to our fathers, thou hast a cow to thy mother." He swiftly apologised, and in any case the circumstances were exceptional: Wells was about to swing for the crime of priest-harbouring. But even a self-fashioned loyalist like Sir Thomas Tresham privately entertained hostile views on the 'bastardised' Elizabeth.

Conflicted loyalties caused considerable anguish, as evinced by the desperately sad letter that 24-year-old convert Robert Markham wrote to his parents in 1594. "Every hour presents a hell unto me... In the night, I cannot sleep or take any rest, so monstrous is the horror of my conscience." He pledged never to fight against Elizabeth, nor to have any truck with conspiracy. "I am," he declared, "and will be as good a subject to her Majesty as any in England." But there had to be a caveat: "My conscience only reserve I to myself, whereupon dependeth my salvation."

Markham chose exile, like many others, some of whom became radicalised by the experience. The Catholics who stayed at home employed various methods to sustain their faith, from spiritual reading, prayer and meditation to the preservation of rosaries and relics. They were advised to internalise their devotions. For instance, certain spots in the garden could be linked to different saints, so that walks would become, "as it were, short pilgrimages". But there was no substitute for the sacraments and, though some erstwhile Marian priests continued to minister in secret, it was only when William Allen's seminary boys started coming off the boats in 1574 that Catholic hopes – and government fears – were revived.

The first English missionaries came from Douai in Flanders, where William Allen, the former principal of St Mary Hall, Oxford, had founded a college in 1568. In June 1580, they were joined in England by the Jesuits, members of a dynamic religious order founded in the furnace of the Reformation.

"We travelled only for souls," insisted
Edmund Campion at his execution at
Tyburn on 1 December 1581, "we touched
neither state nor policy." These were indeed
the instructions that this Jesuit and his
co-missioner, Robert Persons, had carried
from Rome. But they were also armed with
faculties to print books anonymously, they
insisted upon absolute recusancy, and they
challenged the state to a public debate.



Elizabeth's advisors foiled a series of assassination plots

# Spain plans an invasion, 1571 Walsingham ensnares

The Ridolfi plot – named after the Florentine merchant who acted as the go-between for the Duke of Norfolk, Mary Stuart, Philip II and the pope – was a plan for a Spanish invasion of England and the substitution of Elizabeth with Mary. Roberto Ridolfi was known to the English government, and met with Elizabeth before heading for Rome. The plot was foiled when a courier was arrested at Dover. Norfolk was executed but Mary survived and Ridolfi later emerged as a papal senator. He clearly relished intrigue.

# Throckmorton's sorry end, 1583

Francis Throckmorton was the linkman for a plot that might be seen as part of a continuum of intrigues sponsored by the powers of Catholic Europe in the 1580s. The aim, as with the Ridolfi plot, was the overthrow of Elizabeth and the restoration of Catholicism in England. Mary Stuart's kinsman, the Duke of Guise, was set to invade at Arundel, but the plan was aborted upon Throckmorton's arrest in November 1583. Throckmorton was "somewhat pinched" (ie tortured) and executed the following July.

# The lone extremist blows his cover, 1583

Not every attempt on Elizabeth's life strained the sinews of Europe's whisperers and watchers. John Somerville, a distant kinsman (by marriage) of William Shakespeare, seems only to have had a "frantic humour" and a pistol in his pocket when he set off from his home in Warwickshire to kill the queen. He failed because he broadcast his intentions en route but, as the murder of William of Orange (see overleaf) proved, it only took one extremist, bent on martyrdom and blind to worldly consequence, to effect an assassination.

# Walsingham ensnares Mary Stuart, 1586

The plot that brought down Mary Stuart was, from the outset, a conspiracy to assassinate Elizabeth. Anthony Babington was not its chief architect, though it was his letter of 6 July 1586 that floated to Mary the plan for "the dispatch of the usurper". The plot was uncovered – and arguably fomented – using an agent provocateur, intercepts (via the bung-hole of a beer keg) and forgery. Whatever the ethics of the sting, the plot was real. Priests were involved

Priests were involuded in Mary was complicit. She was executed on 8 February 1587.

A carving depicting Mary Stuart, queen regnant of Scotland from 1542–67

# Jesuits prepare to strike - or do they? 1594

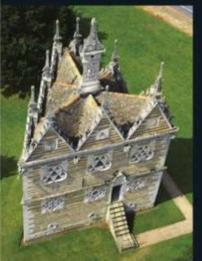
Elizabeth's last decade saw court rivalry seep into intelligence work, and the result was an occasional – and occasionally deliberate – blurring of perception and reality. Immediately after the Earl of Essex's exposure of a dubious poison plot, the queen's adviser William Cecil went one up with a Jesuit conspiracy involving several Irish soldiers, whose confessions seemed remarkably fortuitous and somewhat muddled. Two of the assassins-designate were known to Cecil. One he had not deemed a significant threat; the other was an informant and possible plant.

# Places to visit

Catholic ingenuity in architecture around England

# **Rushton Triangular** Lodge, Northamptonshire

english-heritage.org.uk



A monument to the Trinity, a symbol of recusant resistance, a testament to the ego of Sir Thomas Tresham: this 1590s 'warrener's lodge' is one of the strangest buildings in Britain. Mystical inscriptions and devices abound. Within a short distance are the priest-hole and oratory of Rushton

Hall (now a hotel), and the haunting, unfinished Lyveden New Bield (National Trust), which was Tresham's cross-shaped tribute to the Passion.

# Bar Convent, York, North Yorkshire

bar-convent.org.uk

England's oldest living convent celebrates the Catholic heritage of the north of England as well as the life of the order's founder, Mary Ward (1585-1645). Highlights of the convent's exhibition, which reopened in 2015 after a major revamp, are an altar disguised as a bedstead (pictured) and a relic of Margaret Clitherow, the butcher's wife from York who was 'pressed' to death in 1586 for refusing to plead to the charge of priest-harbouring.





# **Harvington Hall,** Worcestershire

harvingtonhall.com

The former home of the recusant Humphrey Pakington, Harvington boasts the finest surviving set of hides (one pictured above) in England. They include a priest-hole accessed via a hinged timber beam in the library, and a false chimney, blackened for effect. They were probably devised by Nicholas 'Little John' Owen, an Oxford carpenter who served the English mission and died after interrogation in the Tower in 1606.

**Baddesley Clinton,** Warwickshire

nationaltrust.org.uk

It was in the sewer-hide of this Catholic safe house that, on 19 October 1591, seven priests are thought to have hidden for four hours, ankle-deep in water, as the queen's officials "tore madly" through the house above them. "The zeal and courage of Catholics is never more in evidence than at times like this," wrote the Jesuit Superior, Henry Garnet, in admiration of his doughty hostess Anne Vaux, alias 'the virgin'.

# **Tower of London**

hrp.org.uk/toweroflondon

Few inmates were as lucky as the Jesuit John Gerard, whose escape from the Cradle Tower in 1597 is as vividly related in his Autobiography as the grim scenes of torture that preceded it. Replicas of torture devices can be seen in the Tower, as well as poignant prisoner graffiti (below) etched into the walls by men devoid of hope – but not faith.



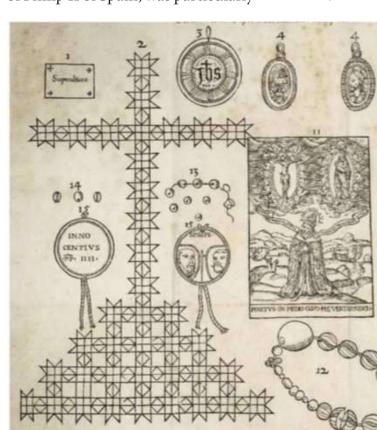
Campion's 'brag' chilled his adversaries: "Touching our Society, be it known unto you that we have made a league – all the Jesuits in the world, whose succession and multitude must overreach all the practices of England - cheerfully to carry the cross that you shall lay upon us and never to despair your recovery while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments, or to be consumed with your prisons. The expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun; it is of God, it cannot be withstood. So the faith was planted, so it must be restored."

Campion was one of about 130 priests executed for religious treason in Elizabeth's reign. A further 60 of their lay supporters were also put to death. Torture was used more than in any other English reign. Margaret Ward, destined for the gallows for organising the escape of a priest, protested that "the queen herself, if she had the bowels of a woman, would have done as much if she had known the ill-treatment he underwent". But it was the heart and stomach of a king that were required for England's defence.

# **Assassination attempts**

With no named successor, and a Catholic heir presumptive – Mary, Queen of Scots – waiting, wings clipped but ready to soar, Elizabeth I was vulnerable to conspiracy. The security of the realm depended entirely on her personal survival in an age that saw brother rulers taken by bullet and blade. The assassination in 1584 of William of Orange, the Dutch Protestant figurehead shot in the chest

by a Catholic fanatic chasing the bounty of Philip II of Spain, was particularly



alarming. The following year, parliament passed a statute licensing the revenge killing of assassins, or witting beneficiaries of assassins, in the event of a successful attempt on the queen's life.

The threat from Spain, the papacy, the French house of Guise and the agents of Mary, Queen of Scots was very real and seemingly unceasing. From the sanctuary of exile, William Allen agitated for an invasion of England and frequently exaggerated the extent of home support. Only fear made Catholics obey the queen, he assured the pope in 1585, "which fear will be removed when they see the force from without". The priests, he added, would direct the consciences and actions of Catholics "when the time comes".

In reality, there were very few Elizabethans willing to perpetrate what would now be called an act of terror. But there was a vast grey area that encompassed all kinds of suspicious activity — communication with the queen's enemies, the handling of tracts critical of the regime, the non-disclosure of sensitive information, the sheltering and funding of priests who turned out to be subversive. Even the quiescent majority was feared for what it *might* do if there was ever a confrontation between Elizabeth I and the pope.

When asked the "bloody questions", framed to extract ultimate allegiances, Catholics proved as adept as their queen at the "answer answerless". Spies and agent provocateurs were thrown into the field, moles were placed in embassies, and recusant houses were searched for priests and "popish trash". The queen's agents were sometimes overzealous – sometimes even downright immoral – in their pursuit

# in 1588 was celebrated as the triumph of Christ over Antichrist

of national security. "There is less danger in fearing too much than too little," advised the queen's spymaster, Francis Walsingham.

In 1588, when the Spanish Armada beat menacingly towards the English Channel, the "most obstinate and noted" recusants were rounded up and imprisoned. Sir Thomas Tresham begged for a chance to prove his "true English heart" and fight for his queen. He vigorously disputed the claim that "while we lived, her Majesty should not be in security, nor the realm freed from invasion".

Nevertheless, the Spaniards sailing aboard the Armada were told to expect support from at least a third of England's population. Elizabeth's Privy Council was "certain" that an invasion would "never" have been attempted "but upon hope" of internal assistance. It may have been a false hope, built on a house of cards by émigrés desperate to see the old faith restored at home, but for as long as it was held and acted upon by backers powerful enough to do damage, Tresham and the rest – whether "faithfullest true English subjects" or not – were indeed a security risk.

England's victory over the Armada in 1588 was celebrated as the triumph of Christ over Antichrist, the true church over the false, freedom over tyranny. Elizabeth I was hailed as Gloriana, the Virgin Queen who "brought up, even under her wing, a nation that was almost begotten and born under her, that never shouted any other Ave than for her name". There was no place for rosaries in this predestined, Protestant version of English history.

Even Philip II, usually so sure of his status as the 'special one', was momentarily confounded by the mysteries of God's will. He soon rallied, however, and there were more (albeit failed) armadas.

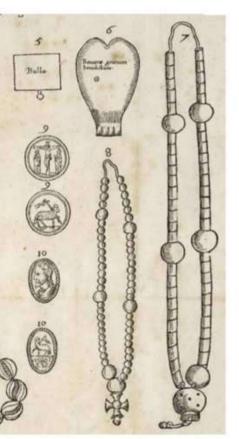
# **Restricting recusants**

At every whisper of invasion, the screw was turned on those 'bad members' known to be recusants. In 1593, the 'statute of confinement' ruled that recusants could not travel beyond five miles of their home without a licence.

Observance could be patchy and enforcement slack. Anti-Catholicism was nearly always more passionate in the abstract than it was on the ground, but it still must have been alienating and psychologically draining to be spied on, searched, and branded an 'unnatural subject' at every critical juncture. Tresham likened it to being "drenched in a sea of shameless slanders".

Tresham outlived Queen Elizabeth by two years. His hope for a measure of toleration under James VI and I did not materialise and, having paid a total of £7,717 in recusancy penalties, he died on 11 September 1605 a disappointed man. The following month his wife's nephew, 'Robin' Catesby, tried to recruit his son, Francis, into the Gunpowder Plot. Francis Tresham was arrested on 12 November, and died before he could face trial. On or soon after 28 November 1605, the family papers were bundled up in a sheet and immured at Rushton Hall. They lay there, undisturbed, for over two centuries until, in 1828, the builders came in.

**Jessie Childs** is an award-winning author and historian. Her latest book, *God's Traitors*, won the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize for History in 2015.



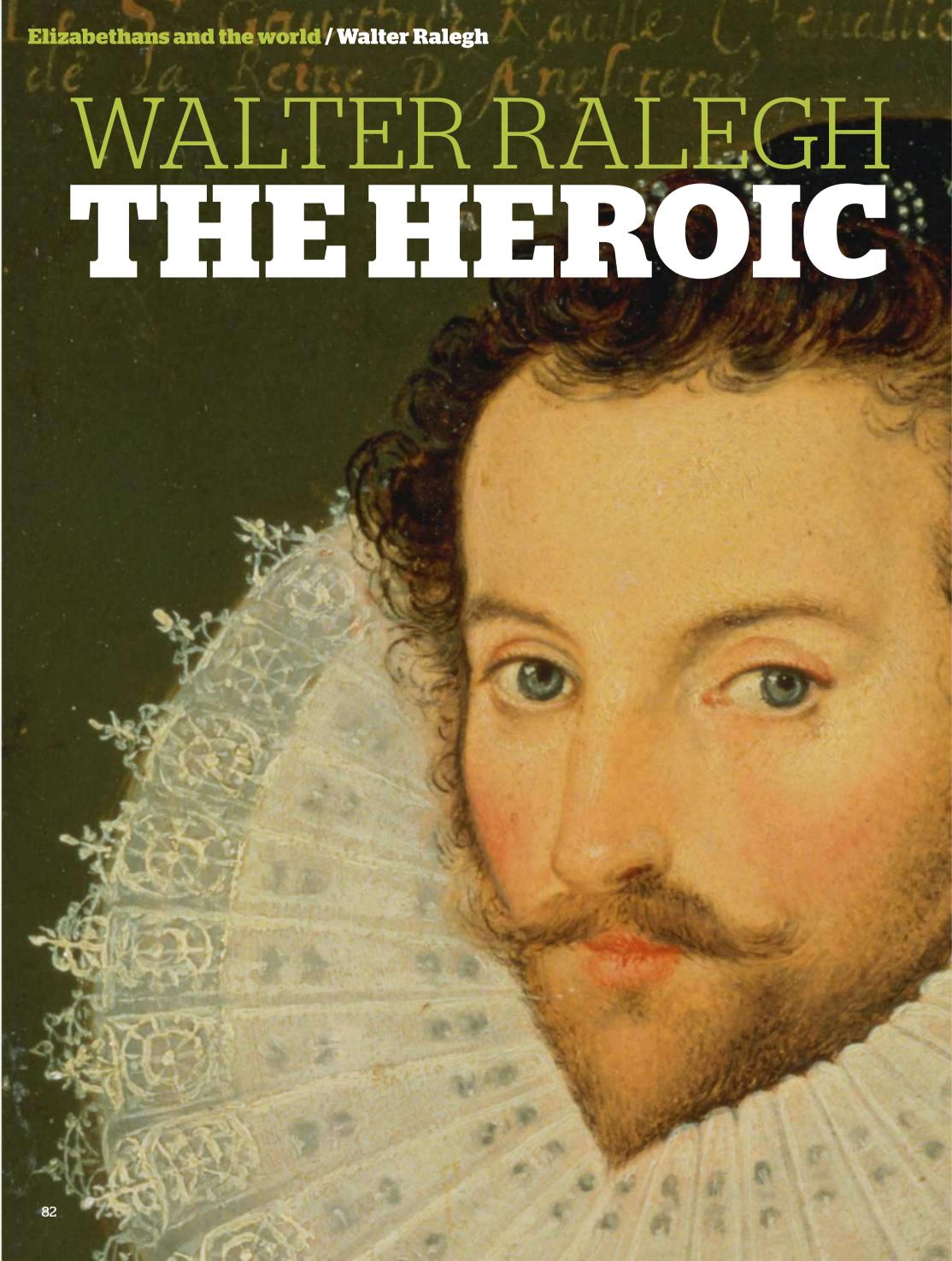


Identification guide A guide (left) issued in 1579 to help officials identify banned devotional objects shows items that might be brought into England, including rosaries, crucifixes and Agnus Deis ABOVE: A cupboard-cum-priesthole at Salford Prior Hall

# DISCOVER MORE

### BOOKS

- ► God's Traitors: Terror and Faith in Elizabethan England by Jessie Childs (The Bodley Head, 2014)
- ► The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I by Stephen Alford (Allen Lane, 2012)
- ➤ Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England by Alexandra Walsham (Boydell Press, 1993)



# HRAILOR

Mark Nicholls explains how the celebrated Elizabethan polymath fell foul of King James and ended up with his neck on the executioner's block

# Pride before a fall

This contemporary portrait shows Sir Walter Ralegh in his prime – "a gorgeous, largerthan-life figure". Unfortunately, many of his peers weren't impressed by his good looks and saw instead an arrogant man, blind to his own weaknesses

arly one October morning in 1618, a prisoner walked from the Gatehouse gaol in Westminster to a scaffold in Old Palace Yard. Sir Walter Ralegh had embarked on his last journey. He faced his death with courage, delivering a speech of 45 minutes in which he paced to and fro, using the platform as a stage, stirring onlookers to a high pitch of religious fervour. Ralegh shared a joke with the executioner: touching the axe he laughed that here was a cure for every disease, a "sharp medicine". When the nervous headsman did not proceed at their prearranged signal, Ralegh – his neck on the block – demanded an end: "What do you fear?" he cried. "Strike, man!" His head was severed at the second blow. The last hero and favourite of the Elizabethan age was dead. He was 64 years old.

How had it come to this? The path to the scaffold was long, and must be followed across several decades. In his prime, during the 1580s, Sir Walter Ralegh appeared the epitome of the self-made man. The fourth son of a Devonshire gentleman, he had exploited looks, hard work and good luck to become one of the most influential men at the court of Queen Elizabeth I.

Ralegh was handsome, with dark features and, as the 17th-century biographer John Aubrey described it, a beard that curled up naturally. Elizabeth, some said, took him for "a kind of oracle". Recognising the man's energy and local knowledge, she groomed him for high office in Devon and Cornwall, counties where independent views in religion and politics combined with an exposed coastline, vulnerable to attacks from the queen's enemy, Spain.

Hilliard painted Ralegh in his prime, and legends grew around this gorgeous, larger-than-life figure. Half a century after Ralegh's death, Thomas Fuller recorded how Sir Walter sacrificed his cloak so that the queen might walk across a "plashy place" at Greenwich. Though the tale is probably mythical, it captures the opportunism of a courtier, fashioning a gesture that still prompts the modern gallant to follow suit. Stephen Pound, for example, laid his coat across a puddle for Hazel Blears during the Labour party's deputy leadership campaign in 2007.

By his mid-thirties, Ralegh was being spoken of as a privy counsellor, one of the queen's closest political advisors. Lord lieutenant of Cornwall, he served as

The polarise as a segh and;

Hostages to fortune

Sir Walter Ralegh imprisons Spaniards during his 1595 expedition to Guiana in search of Eldorado, in this engraving by Theodor de Bry

a member of parliament for Devon. He was showered with rewards, and survived the rise of Elizabeth's newest favourite, the handsome young Earl of Essex, to remain at the heart of court.

# **Arrogant and ambitious**

But though many people admired Ralegh, few liked him. He was arrogant and ambitious, blind to his own weaknesses. Able courtier he may have been, but Ralegh was no politician. He lacked discretion and subtlety, was too quick to say and write the first thing that came into his head, and seldom noticed that there were other valid points of view.

Moreover, a proud self-made man lacks friends when things go wrong – and things did begin to go wrong, as the luck he had once enjoyed deserted him. The queen was infuriated by his clandestine marriage to one of her personal attendants, Bess

Though many people admired Ralegh, few liked him. He was arrogant and ambitious, blind to his own weaknesses

Throckmorton, in 1591, but the clever politician would have appeared Elizabeth's anger and retained her confidence.

Instead, Ralegh and Bess concealed

their marriage and the pregnancy that had prompted it, and when their secrets were discovered they engaged in gestures of contrition that, in their theatrical insincerity, infuriated the queen. Husband and wife were punished by imprisonment in the Tower of London.

Confinement was brief, but
Elizabeth's resentment endured. The
middle-aged man never again enjoyed
her full trust. Now he had to work hard
to retain some powerful friends with
better connections and deeper pockets –
men such as the Earl of Northumberland

men such as the Earl of Northumberland and Henry, Lord Cobham. Their surviving papers shed light on Ralegh's career.

His fortunes recovered somewhat during the later 1590s. Ralegh explored Guiana (a region of South America largely in what's now Venezuela) in 1595, fought gallantly at the sacking of Cádiz in 1596, and was one of few to emerge with credit from the so-called Islands Voyage of 1597, an English expedition to capture the treasure fleet carrying silver back to Spain from mines in America. By Elizabeth's death in 1603 he was again being considered as a privy counsellor, and the queen allowed him to exercise his captaincy of the guard, a position of trust that offered access to the monarch. But his "damnable pride", as Aubrey describes it, ensured that he remained unpopular with ordinary people. The libels of the period mock him:

"Ralegh doth time bestride; He sits twixt wind and tide, Yet up hill he cannot ride, For all his bloody pride."

Higher up the social scale, one of the Earl of Essex's supporters, Sir Josceline Percy, drew up a facetious will in 1601. In one unsubtle bequest, his contempt is obvious:

"Item I do give my buttocks to Sir Walter Ralegh and the pox go with them."

Ralegh lacked political acumen and – fatally, as it transpired – misread the new monarch. James VI of Scotland, who succeeded to the English throne as James I, was determined to end the expensive war with Spain, but Ralegh advocated the continuation of hostilities and even wrote a tract opposing any peace treaty. His enemies at court – notably Henry Howard, the future Earl of Northampton – poisoned the king's mind against him, while former friends such the influential secretary of state Sir Robert Cecil refused to offer their support.

When Ralegh first met the king at Burghley House, James, through a terrible

# Ralegh's rise and fall

1554

1580

1585

1591

1595

1596

1603

1614

1617

1618

Walter Ralegh is born at Hayes, near East Budleigh, Devon

Ralegh assists in the slaughter of 600 Italian mercenaries and their Irish followers at Smerwick, on the Dingle peninsula, Ireland

Ralegh is knighted by Queen Elizabeth I, and continues to acquire lucrative monopolies and other financial rewards



He marries Bess Throckmorton, one of the queen's ladies of the Privy Chamber. Elizabeth I is enraged and has the new husband and wife thrown in the Tower

A 1596 painting of a sea action, possibly the battle of Cádiz

Ralegh serves under the Earl of Essex at the sacking of the Spanish port of Cádiz

> Released from the Tower, Ralegh sails again for Guiana, hoping to find the treasure that will restore his fortunes

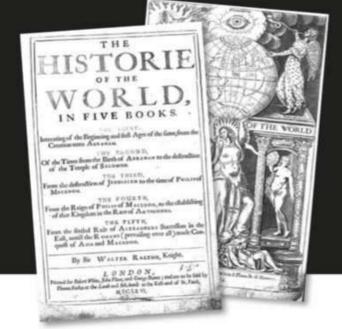
> > Ralegh returns from Guiana empty-handed, and is put to death without a new trial on the conviction of 1603

Ralegh searches, unsuccessfully, for gold and silver in Guiana (now largely in Venezuela). Claims the land for Elizabeth I

At the succession of James I, Ralegh is arrested and condemned to death on a charge of treason. His life is spared, but he remains a prisoner in the Tower of London.

Ralegh publishes the first volume in a projected history of the world

Two pages from Ralegh's *History* of the World in Five Books, first published in 1614



# The last Elizabethan

At his death, Sir Walter Ralegh was considered the last of the Elizabethans. The Spanish envoy described him as the only surviving pirate of a "deceased virago". Sellar and Yeatman, in that most perceptive of modern histories, 1066 and All That, suggested that he was executed for being left over from the previous reign.

But even if such a creature ever existed, was Ralegh a typical Elizabethan? Many myths need debunking here. Ralegh did not introduce tobacco or potatoes into England or Ireland. He played no significant part in defeating the Spanish Armada. Far from being a 'sea dog' he was something of a 'Jonah', unlucky with winds and tides, and frequently seasick.

A hypochondriac, weak in the legs, self-obsessed, full of self-pity, he never stopped imagining that his health was precarious. Just the same, elements in his character are close to what a later age regards as Elizabethan. At times furiously energetic and combative, he was, as John Aubrey suggests, "no slug".

Ralegh was the typical younger son, the self-made man out to establish his dynasty amid the landed elite, proud of his achievements and – in a society tuned to deferential hierarchies – decried for them, too.

We struggle to do justice to the complexity of his character. Ralegh was, indeed, a renaissance man. He was a soldier, a courtier, a sea captain and a chemist. He was a religious sceptic, ready to challenge Christian orthodoxies, though always careful to emphasise his belief in God and providence. He was also a patron of science, supporting for many years the great mathematician and astronomer Thomas Harriot. An advocate of colonial expansion, he attempted to found the first English colony in America, and he gives his name to the state capital of North Carolina.

An eloquent poet in the 1590s, the best work in the small Ralegh canon is touched with pathos, power and beauty in equal measure. He had an individual poetic voice, still much admired. The *History of the World* is a work of great power, a synthesis of knowledge from a Tower prisoner, written in the English of Shakespeare. Small wonder that the book was read and admired by so many, Cromwell, Milton, Hume and Gibbon among them – it was an opinionated Englishman's history.

Ralegh's gift for words is perhaps his most lasting legacy. In this, as in much else, he characterised the sometimes colourful, sometimes troubled court at which he once flourished.





pun, gave Ralegh an idea of what was to come. "On my soul, mon," the monarch said, "I have heard rawly of thee." After being stripped of all his offices and 'perks', Ralegh was accused of plotting with Lord Cobham to bring about a Spanish invasion and of conspiring to murder the "king and his cubs". Though evidence was thin, it is clear that Ralegh had expressed his anger and discussed dangerous topics. He was tried at Winchester in November 1603, and sentenced to death.

Sympathy for the underdog won Ralegh new friends. Henceforth he was regarded by many as a victim of arbitrary royal rule and court intrigues. Technically, as the law then stood, there is little doubt that he was guilty of treason. Ralegh had "compassed and imagined" the death of his king, even if compassing and imagining had merely taken the form of grumbling among friends. In the uncertainty of a new reign, few courtiers were willing to risk their own careers to speak up for him.

But, though the verdict might have been correct, the carefully prepared prosecution was bungled. Riled by Ralegh's courageous defence and perfect behaviour in the dock, the attorney general Sir Edward Coke lost his temper along with the thread of his argument. Confused eyewitness accounts of the trial circulating afterwards only emphasise the fact that Ralegh's conviction depended on testimony given and since retracted by Cobham, who refused to put his name to damning accusations blurted out in anger soon after his arrest. As Ralegh himself reminded the jury, if convictions were to be sustained on such evidence, if people were "judged upon suspicions and inferences", then no one would be safe.

Ralegh was not, of course, executed in 1603. Early in his reign, James wished to earn the title of "clemens as well as Justus", as the diplomat Dudley Carleton put it, and most of those accused in these plots were spared. But though James was prepared to let Ralegh live as a prisoner, he

Ralegh's *History*of the World was
suppressed on first
publication in 1614
because it was
"too saucy in
censuring princes"

would not set him free. The years passed, and Ralegh understood that the king intended to let him die in prison. For an active man who still believed that James would one day appreciate his loyalty, this was a desperate thought.

Ralegh turned to scholarship. He took up pharmacy, concocting a 'cordial' that was used for more than a century as a medicine of last resort, with conspicuous lack of success. He sought solace in writing, assembling a library of more than 500 books in his rooms within the Bloody Tower and giving his opinions on political developments at home and abroad.

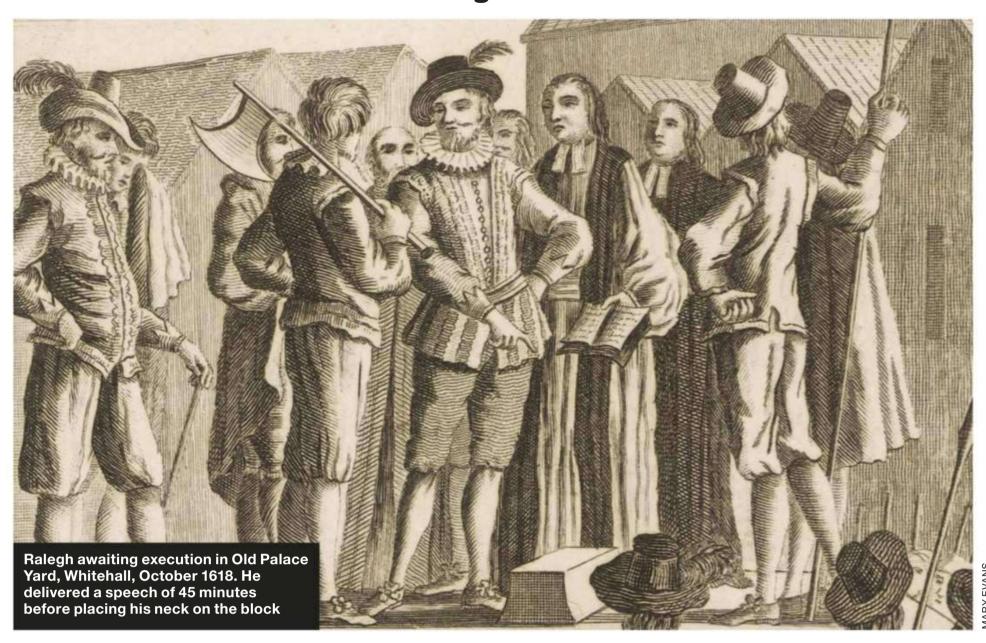
Much of what he wrote was barbed, his criticism of the monarch only lightly concealed. Ralegh's History of the World, which tells the story of mankind from the creation to the second century BC, was suppressed on first publication in 1614 because, as the London newsmonger John Chamberlain put it, the prisoner had been "too saucy in censuring princes". Chamberlain made a good point, because Ralegh dwelt time and again on the corruption that accompanies power. If he was careful to emphasise the need for obedience to a monarch, in accordance with God's will, he was under no illusions as to human weakness. Monarchs may be anointed by God, but God – for reasons known only to Himself – anointed fallible creatures.

# **Buying support**

James could do little to stifle these comments. Ralegh had friends at court, including the secretary of state Sir Ralph Winwood and the favourite George Villiers, later Duke of Buckingham. He had to buy Buckingham's support, but it was worth having. Desperate for freedom, Ralegh became obsessed by the possibility of finding gold and silver in Guiana. Inflating some discoveries made on his 1595 expedition, he was convinced he knew where to look, and sought permission to lead an expedition that would exploit lucrative mines. England was now at peace with Spain, and Spain had developed its settlements in Guiana since the 1590s. But James needed cash for his treasury. In 1616, Ralegh was given his freedom, and a commission to search for treasure.

He understood the dangers. Succeed, and he would make his king, his supporters and himself immeasurably wealthy. Fail, and he would face an uncertain future. Ever the optimist, he brushed aside fears, reminding Francis Bacon that men were never called pirates if they were wealthy

# Elizabethans and the world / Walter Ralegh



enough to pay off their critics. Though many volunteers and investors were infected with gold fever, more sober voices questioned the viability of the enterprise. "God speed him," Chamberlain wrote at Ralegh's departure for Guiana in 1617, "and send him a better voyage than I can hope for."

Those prayers went unanswered. Ralegh contracted fever during an arduous Atlantic crossing and was too sick to accompany his forces up the Orinoco river to the site of the supposed mine. The expedition, led instead by his lieutenant Lawrence Keymis, found no silver – but did ransack the Spanish settlement at San Thomé, during which attack Ralegh's eldest son, Wat, was killed. When the troops straggled back to the river's mouth, Ralegh's anger drove Keymis to suicide, while the disheartened volunteers refused to search further. Ralegh returned home a virtual prisoner of a mutinous crew. "My brains are broken," he wrote to Bess, and for once he did not exaggerate.

# **Diplomatic incident**

This left James with the problem of what to do with his failed treasure-seeker. A diplomatic incident loomed: Philip III of Spain, furious at the attack on San Thomé, called for Ralegh's execution. Yet many in England were by now uneasy about Catholic ambitions in Europe, and wanted to give no comfort to Spain.

Ralegh's fate turned on James's hostility. He had been a thorn in the king's side for too long, and the more James's investigators peered into Ralegh's recent plans and negotiations, the more it seemed that he had operated as an agent of France, poisoning the Anglo-Spanish peace. There was enough truth in this picture to turn James away from clemency. Despite the principled objections of lawyers and judges, uneasy at the thought of executing a man on a sentence passed 15 years earlier, the king got his way. Ralegh went to the scaffold.

In 1618, as in 1603, there is evidence to suggest that Ralegh was, technically, guilty as charged. The irony is that on both occasions inept management of proceedings generated sympathy for the prisoner that endured after death. James could not escape

In the words of the historian GM Trevelyan, Ralegh's ghost "pursued the House of Stuart to the scaffold" the personal. In executing an elderly man, with so little respect for the mechanisms of justice, he confirmed suspicions expressed in Ralegh's own writings that kings were perverted by the power they wielded.

Alive, Ralegh could, as the late historian AL Rowse once suggested, be a bore about himself. Dead, and silent, the story of his life gathered colour: legends of tobacco, potatoes, cloaks and amorous adventures clustered around him. A dissident of the 1610s was shaped to later political needs. Several witnesses to Ralegh's execution – John Pym, John Eliot and John Hampden – were among the parliamentary opponents of Charles I two decades later. In the words of the historian GM Trevelyan, Ralegh's ghost "pursued the House of Stuart to the scaffold". It has harried the memory of James I ever since.

**Dr Mark Nicholls** teaches history at St John's College, Cambridge. His books include *A History of the Modern British Isles*, 1529–1603: The Two Kingdoms (Blackwell, 1999)

### **DISCOVER MORE**

### **BOOKS**

➤ Sir Walter Raleigh: In Life and Legend by Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams (Continuum, February 2011)

➤ The Poems of Sir Walter Ralegh: A Historical Edition by Michael Rudick (ed) (MRTS, 1999)



In 1588, a huge fleet of Spanish ships sailed to attack Britain and secure the overthrow of Elizabeth I - but was defeated in a near-legendary naval victory. Robert Hutchinson presents an octet of facts about the Armada 89

or much of Elizabeth's reign, the threat of an invasion of England by Spain was very real. Though Spanish King Philip II had been the queen's brother-in-law (having married Mary I), relations between Catholic Spain and England – a Protestant nation under Elizabeth – had deteriorated, and from 1585 the two countries were at war. The following year, Philip began developing a scheme to send a fleet of nearly 130 ships from Spain to England, with the aim of escorting a 26,000-strong invasion army across the English Channel from Flanders.

If the mission had succeeded, the future of Elizabeth I and her Protestant England would have looked very black indeed. Had the force landed as planned near Margate in Kent in summer 1588, it is likely that battle-hardened Spanish troops would have been in London within a week. England would probably have reverted to the Catholic faith, and the English might today be speaking Spanish.

But the Armada under its commander-in chief, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, suffered one of the most signal catastrophes in naval history. Myth, driven by Elizabethan propaganda, has shaped our view of that dramatic running fight up the English Channel – yet the Spanish were defeated not merely by the queen's plucky sea dogs fighting against overwhelming odds, but by appalling weather, poor planning, and flawed strategy and tactics. And this isn't the only surprising fact about the most famous military episode of the Elizabethan era, as these eight insights reveal.

# English Catholics were expected to support the Spanish invasion

Elizabeth's ministers as well as Philip expected that the half of England's population that remained Catholic would rise in support of the Spanish invaders after any landing. Jewel-hilted swords, intended as Philip's gifts for English Catholic nobles, were found in a box on board the fatally damaged flagship *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* after the English vice-admiral Sir Francis Drake boarded.

The Spanish king's spies had reported beforehand that the "greater part of Lancashire is Catholic... and the town of Liverpool", and that the counties of Westmorland and Northumberland remained "really faithful to his majesty".

In addition, another Spanish assessment in August 1586 estimated that 2,000 men could be recruited in Lincolnshire "which was well effected to the Catholic religion", plus 3,000 more in Norfolk, while Hampshire was "full of Catholics". This last

A shilling struck to commemorate the marriage of Mary I to Philip II of Spain contained some

truth. In early June 1586 Henry Radcliffe, 4th Earl of Sussex, suppressed what he described as an intended rebellion "in the country near Portsmouth" and arrested some of its leaders.

Elizabeth's government took stern measures to contain the threat posed from what they saw as potential fifth columnists. Recusants who refused to attend Anglican services were disarmed, and those regarded as most dangerous were imprisoned without trial in fortresses such as Wisbech Castle in Cambridgeshire – arguably the world's first internment camps.

In Bedfordshire, Henry Grey, 6th Earl of Kent, asked how he should deal with female recusants who were "married to husbands that are conformable in religion". Godfrey Foljambe arrested his own grandmother, writing that "[I] now have her in custody".

# English merchants helped supply the Armada

Some among Elizabeth's subjects placed profit ahead of patriotism. In 1587, her ministers learnt

that 12 English merchants – some based in Bristol – had been selling supplies and equipment to the Armada "to the hurt of

her majesty and undoing of the realm, if not redressed". Their nine cargoes of contraband, valued at between £300 and £2,000 each, contained provisions, ammunition, gunpowder and ordnance. The fate of these reckless traders (perhaps Catholic sympathisers) remains unknown but it's unlikely they'd have enjoyed the queen's mercy, which was limited at best.

A mid-16th-century print shows two merchant ships firing cannon at one another. English merchants helped supply the Armada Support for Elizabeth was sometimes less than enthusiastic. Sir John Gilbert, who organised Devon's defence against the Spanish Armada, refused permission for his ships to join Drake's western squadron, but instead allowed them to sail on their planned trading voyage to South America in March 1588 in defiance of naval orders.



IDGEMAN/ALAMY



# English Catholics sailed aboard the Armada's ships

At least four of the 'gentlemen adventurers' in the ships' companies were English, and there were 18 among the salaried officers. Inevitably, some paid a heavy price for their disloyalty to the crown; though five Catholics managed to slip away by boat from the stricken *Rosario* before Drake took the flagship, two Englishmen were captured on board and taken to the Tower of London as "rebels and traitors to their country".

One, identified as the Cornishman Tristram Winslade, was handed to officers employed by Elizabeth's spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham, who were ordered to interrogate him "using torture... at their pleasure". Miraculously, Winslade survived the rack and Elizabeth's justice, and died in the Catholic seminary at Douai (now in northern France) in November 1605.

On board the battle-damaged San Mateo, beached between Ostend and Sluis after the battle of Gravelines, two Englishmen were killed by Dutch sailors. One was named as William Browne, a brother of Viscount Montague. The local commissioner for the Protestant States of Zeeland reported that the second man killed was "very rich, who left William as his heir".

Other Englishmen were reported as having been aboard this ship, eating with her captain, Don Diego Pimentel. "One was called Robert, another Raphael, once servant to the... mayor of London. We do not know their surnames." They may have been among those forcibly drowned or hanged by the Dutch who were rebelling against Spanish rule.

Before the campaign began, there were reports of disaffection below decks in Elizabeth's warships. After a scare on board Lord Edmund Sheffield's White Bear, the "barber and three of four others took the oath [of allegiance to the crown] and renounced the pope's authority".

# The pope supported the Armada

As the costs of preparing the Armada rocketed, Philip was forced to ask Pope Sixtus V for a loan. However, this pope was notorious for his miserliness – as the Spanish ambassador to the Vatican complained: "When it comes to getting money out of him, it is like squeezing his life blood."

Perhaps the pope's reticence was exacerbated by his reputed infatuation for Elizabeth – he told an astonished Venetian ambassador that "were she a Catholic, she would be our most beloved, for she is of great worth."

In addition, Sixtus had a pet project to buy the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – or recover it by force of arms – from the Ottoman Turks and rebuild it in Rome. He was piqued that, though the Spanish army "would be sufficient for this purpose", it was fighting England instead of achieving his ambitions in the Holy Land.

Eventually Sixtus promised to pay one million gold ducats (roughly equivalent to £660m today), but stipulated that only half would be paid up front. The remainder would be paid in equal instalments every two months after Spanish forces set foot in England.

Philip could bestow the English crown on whomever he wished, providing that the realm was immediately returned to the Catholic faith. Sixtus also demanded that the church's property and rights, alienated since the time of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, should now be restored. In the event, the pope paid out nothing at all.

After the Armada's defeat, Sixtus instructed a cardinal to write to console Philip and to encourage him to launch a new expedition against England. The pope refrained from writing himself, because he feared the king "might make it a pretext for asking him for money".

# Elizabethans and the world / Armada



# The Armada's leader, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, did not want the command

Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, 7th Duke of Medina Sidonia, was an administrator who had never been to sea. He told the Spanish king: "I know by the small experience I have had afloat that I soon become sea-sick." However, he had been the first to reinforce Cádiz during Drake's raid on that city in 1587, and had been appointed captain-general of Andalusia as "conspicuous proof of the king's favour".

After considering his appointment for two days, Medina Sidonia made clear his absolute conviction that the Armada expedition was a grave mistake and had little chance of success. Only a miracle, he added in a frank and outspoken letter, could save it. Philip's counsellors, horror-struck at its electrifying contents, dared not show the letter to the king. "Do not depress us with fears for the fate of the Armada because in such a cause, God will make sure it succeeds," they begged the new admiral.

As for his suitability for command, "nobody knows more about naval affairs than you". Then their tone became menacing: "Remember

that the reputation and esteem you currently enjoy for courage and wisdom would entirely be forfeited if what you wrote to us became generally known (although we shall keep it secret)."

But when storms scattered and damaged the Armada after it left Lisbon, Medina Sidonia's grave doubts about his mission returned. He wrote to Philip: "I am bound to confess that I see very few, or hardly any of those in the Armada with any knowledge or ability to perform the duties entrusted to them." Better, he advised, to agree "some honourable terms with the enemy" while the Armada was being repaired in A Coruña.

On receiving this letter, Philip spent all "day and night in prayer". His mood was not improved by a warning from the commander of his land forces in the Spanish Netherlands that they did not have suitable crosschannel transport for the troops.

But Philip admonished Medina Sidonia, writing: "I have dedicated this enterprise to God. Pull yourself together then and do your part!"

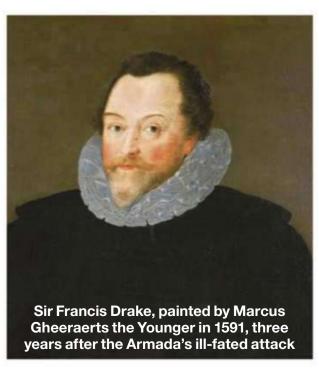
# Sir Francis Drake was more interested in looting booty than fighting

The Armada was sighted off the Lizard on 19 July. After the first fight south of Cornwall two days later, Drake was ordered to shadow the Spanish fleet with a light burning at his stern as a guide to the following English fleet. However, during the night after that first clash, the light disappeared. Drake had left his station to loot the stricken *Rosario*.

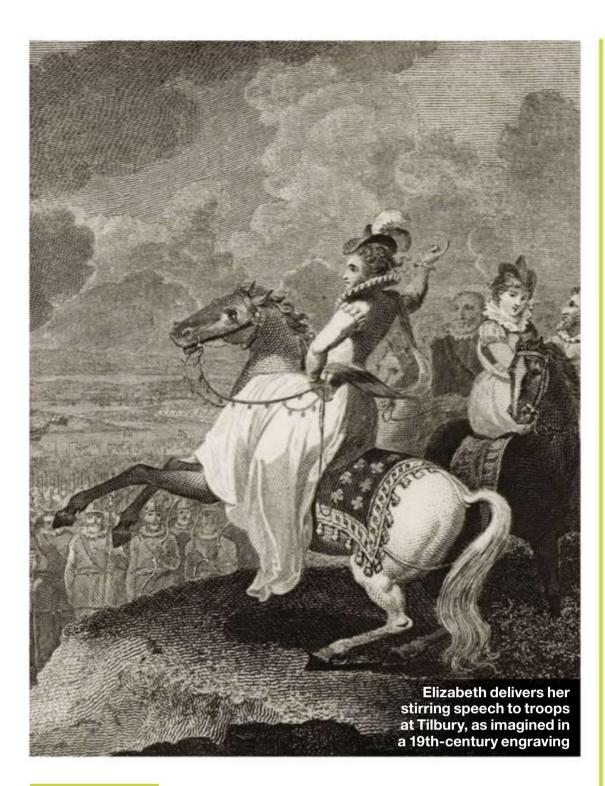
At dawn *Ark Royal*, carrying the English admiral Lord Howard of Effingham, and two other English ships found themselves hard up against the Armada's rearguard. They hastily retreated. Drake claimed afterwards that he had sighted strange sails to starboard at midnight and, believing them to be Spanish, doused his lantern and set off in hot pursuit. They turned out to be innocent German merchant ships.

Doubtless Howard deemed it impolitic to court-martial one of England's naval heroes at a time of national emergency – even though through his actions the English fleet had lost both time and distance in chasing the Spaniards.

Martin Frobisher, commanding *Triumph*, seethed: "Drake's light we looked for but there was no light to be seen... Like a coward he kept by her [the *Rosario*] all night because he would have the spoil... We will have our shares or I will make him spend the best blood in his belly."



**LAM** 

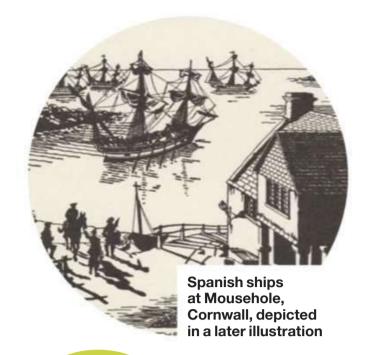


Elizabeth made her famous "body of a weak and feeble woman" speech only after the Armada had been chased out of the channel

On 8 August, Elizabeth arrived at Tilbury to encourage her forces, famously declaring that "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king – and of a King of England too ... shortly we shall have a famous victory over the enemies of my God and of my kingdom".

But though fears of an invasion from Flanders lingered, the Armada itself – which had already been delayed by bad weather, and which consisted in large part not of warships but scouting or supply vessels – had been weakened during fighting with English ships at Gravelines, and had fled north to Scottish waters before skirting Ireland en route back to Spain.

In fact, rumours about the planned invasion were just Elizabethan propaganda, and – with the cost of her forces in the likely invasion areas of Kent and Essex amounting to £783 14s 8d per day – the queen ordered an immediate demobilisation of the army.



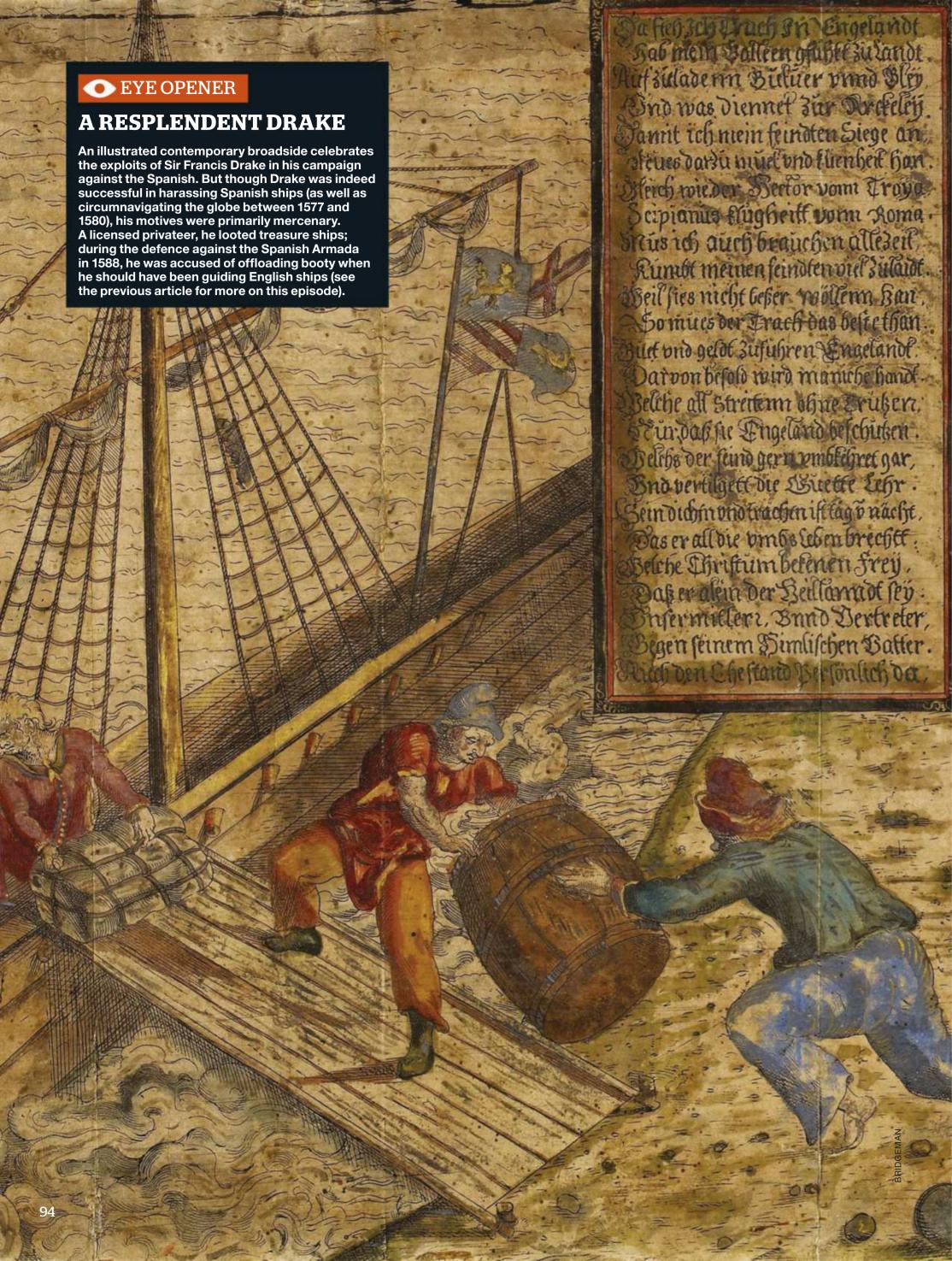
The Spanish fleet was not the last Armada sent against England

On 23 July 1595, four Spanish galleys sailed on a reconnaissance mission from southern Brittany and landed at Mousehole in Cornwall. The fishing village was burned and three men killed. A small force of Cornish militia fled in blind panic at the first sight of the Spanish troops, and Penzance was then bombarded, the Spanish destroying houses and sinking three ships in its harbour. Newlyn was also burned. Fearing the imminent arrival of an English fleet, the Spaniards departed on 4 August – but not before a Catholic Mass was celebrated openly on English soil.

Two more fleets were despatched in 1596 and 1597, but these were also dispersed by storms. A larger force of 3,000 Spanish troops landed at Kinsale in south-west Ireland in 1601 to assist Irish rebels, but these troops were forced to surrender.

The 19-year Anglo-Spanish war ended in 1604 at the behest of Elizabeth's successor, James VI and I, who was determined to conclude the cripplingly expensive hostilities. With the Treaty of London, England ended its support of the Dutch rebellion in the Spanish Netherlands, and renounced English privateers' attacks on Spanish shipping. On Spain's part, the treaty acknowledged that official hopes of restoring Catholicism to England were over for ever.

Robert Hutchinson is the author of *The Spanish Armada* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013)









Cut off from much of Catholic Europe, Elizabeth I's regime embarked on a remarkable relationship with the Islamic world, as **Jerry Brotton** reveals

> n 25 February 1570, a papal bull issued in Rome by Pope Pius V, entitled Regnans in Excelsis ('Reigning on High'), excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I. The

bull condemned "Elizabeth, the pretended Queen of England" for "having seized on the kingdom and monstrously usurped the place of supreme head of the church in all England". It concluded: "We do out of the fullness of our apostolic power declare the aforesaid Elizabeth as being a heretic and a favourer of heretics, and her adherents in the matters aforesaid, to have incurred the sentence of excommunication."

The bull's consequences are well known. It divided English Catholics over whether or not to rebel against Elizabeth, while strengthening patriotic support for the queen and pushing her towards more aggressive Protestant policies at home and abroad. Pius's decision tacitly supported a series of attempts to assassinate Elizabeth, and ultimately led to the sailing of the Armada in 1588. But it also had another, less well-known but equally significant outcome: it allowed the Tudors to establish a series of commercial and military alliances with the Islamic world on a scale never seen before in England.

# A common enemy

Over the next 30 years, Elizabeth would broker deals with the Ottoman, Persian and Saadian (Moroccan) empires that saw hundreds, if not thousands, of Elizabethan men and women travelling across Muslim lands. Some converted to Islam, others merely traded amicably, while Elizabeth's diplomats travelled back and forth between Whitehall, Marrakech, Constantinople and Qazvin (the Persian empire's capital), concocting Anglo-Islamic alliances as a bulwark against what at the time was the

common enemy of both Islam and Protestantism: Catholicism.

The reasons for this surprising and generally overlooked alliance go back to the rise of Islam since the time of the crusades, and the more unforeseen consequences of the 16th-century Reformation. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 proved to be just one particularly dramatic moment in the apparently irresistible global rise of Islamic power in the face of a weak and divided Christianity. The papacy preached that the Muslim faith was nothing more than a garbled mixture of paganism and apostasy, though such claims were difficult to square with the power of a theocracy that, at the time Luther was calling for reform within the Christian church, ruled north Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Greece, the Holy Land (including Jerusalem), central Asia, most of the Indian subcontinent and large swathes of eastern Europe, and had even reached China.

This should not disguise the conflicts and tensions inherent in (to use a rather unsatisfactory term) 'the Islamic world'. The Sunni Ottoman empire clashed with the neighbouring Persian Shia empire, and had defeated the powerful Egyptian Mamluk sultanate in 1517 to become undisputed defenders of Islam's holy cities and pilgrimage routes. In north-west Africa, the Saadian dynasty (of Arab descent) played fast and loose with their theological distance and independence from the Ottomans.

Nevertheless, to most Christian princes the Islamic world looked like a militarily and

Excommunication allowed the Tudors to establish alliances with the Islamic world on a scale never seen before

Elizabethans and the world / Islamic allies

culturally superior superpower, to be regarded with fear but also admiration.

Martin Luther saw things slightly differently. As he launched his attack on Rome, he argued ingeniously that the Ottomans were part of God's divine plan, and that "to make war on the Turks is to rebel against God, who punishes our sins through them". He regarded the pope and the Turk as two versions of Antichrist, but his initial refusal to support a holy war against the Ottoman empire led the papacy to brand him as a heretic and little better than a Turk.

Writing in his *Dialogue Concerning*Heresies (1528), Sir Thomas More echoed
these attacks, referring to "Luther's sect"
as worse than "all the Turks, all the Saracens,
all the heretics". By the 1530s, as Luther's
reformed religious beliefs found favour
in England, Catholics were conflating
Protestants and Muslims as two versions
of the same heresy.

# **Anglo-Moroccan alliance**

With her excommunication in 1570, the wily queen was quick to turn this situation to her political and commercial advantage. Since the 13th century, various church councils had forbidden trade with Muslim societies, which was punishable with excommunication. Covert trade still continued – Venice and France notoriously turned a blind eye to the injunctions – but by 1570, as a Protestant nation led by an excommunicated sovereign placed beyond papal sanction, Tudor England was suddenly freer than any other Christian country to trade with the Islamic world with ecclesiastical impunity.

Even before her excommunication, Elizabeth had cautiously encouraged trade with lands such as Morocco, and by 1570 English merchants were importing goods worth £28,000 a year (more than the entire revenue from the Portuguese trade), including 250 tonnes of sugar (much to the infamous distress of the queen's teeth) valued at £18,000. Most of the transactions were undertaken with Morocco's sizeable Jewish community, particularly its wealthy 'sugar barons'; one, called Isaac Cabeça, traded sugar for English cloth before going bankrupt in 1568 and being named in a series of insolvency trials in the High Court of Admiralty and Chancery.

By the 1570s Elizabeth sent Edmund Hogan, a member of the Mercers' Company from Hackney, to negotiate with the Saadian sultan Abu Marwan Abd al-Malik I, trading English weapons for Moroccan saltpetre (a key ingredient in gunpowder).

Encouraged by the Moroccan trade's success, Elizabeth and her counsellors –





The holy war
Pope Pius V (top), whose papal bull
inadvertently opened the way for EnglishMuslim relations; Martin Luther (bottom)
argued for a pragmatic approach to Islam

especially Francis Walsingham – proposed an even more ambitious alliance with the Ottomans. There were good reasons to believe that the two religions could establish a common political cause against what they both regarded as the imperial aggression of the Spanish Habsburg king Philip II. Walsingham was particularly attracted to the Ottomans' wooing of Protestants by stressing the commonalities between their faith and that of Islam.

In an extraordinary letter written by the Ottoman Chancery in 1574 and addressed to "the members of the Lutheran sect in Flanders and Spain", the reformers were praised because they did "not worship idols", and had "banished the idols and portraits, and bells from churches, and declared your faith by stating that God Almighty is One and Holy Jesus is His Prophet and Servant, and now, with heart and soul, are seeking

# Elizabeth believed that Protestants and Muslims could establish a common cause against Catholic Spain's aggression

and desirous of the true faith; but the faithless one they call Papa [the pope] does not recognise his Creator as One, ascribing divinity to Holy Jesus (upon him be peace!), and worshipping idols and pictures which he has made with his own hands, thus casting doubt upon the Oneness of God and instigating how many servants of God to that path of error".

Obviously such claims were driven as much by shrewd realpolitik as belief in a commonality between the two religions, but they enabled a remarkable flourishing of Anglo-Ottoman commercial and political relations over the next two decades.

### **Ambassador to the Ottomans**

In 1578 the Norfolk-born factor William Harborne was sent to the Ottoman capital of Constantinople with precise instructions to establish diplomatic relations with the court of Sultan Murad III. The resident Catholic Spanish, French and Venetian ambassadors were appalled at the arrival of a Protestant interloper, Harborne, openly flouting the papal injunction against trading with Islamic 'infidels'. The Spanish ambassador Bernardino de Mendoza complained bitterly that "the Turks are also desirous of friendship with the English on account of the tin which has been sent thither for the last few years, and which is of the greatest value to them, as they cannot cast their guns without it, while the English make a tremendous profit on the article, by means of which alone they maintain the trade with the Levant".

Over the next 10 years Harborne established himself as what the Ottoman court called the 'Lutheran ambassador' to Murad. He negotiated England's first-ever trade agreement with a Muslim power, established a string of English trading posts throughout the Mediterranean, and encouraged the Ottomans to attack the Spanish navy to forestall the sailing of Philip II's Armada in 1588.

The venture was so successful that in 1581 Elizabeth granted a charter to the newly created Turkey Company, with Harborne as its formal representative and England's first ambassador to the Ottomans. He oversaw



a burgeoning trade in English tin, lead (stripped from deconsecrated English churches) and wool. He negotiated the release of hundreds of English men and women captured by pirates and slavers, all while acting as Walsingham's loyal spy. He was also the intermediary in the first formal exchanges of letters between an English monarch and an Ottoman sultan.

In the spring of 1579 Murad sent letters addressed to "most renowned Elizabeth, most sacred queen, and noble prince of the most mighty worshippers of Jesus, most wise governor of the causes and affairs of the people and family of Nazareth". Elizabeth responded with equal flattery, dispatching a letter from "the most invincible and most mighty defender of the Christian faith against all kind of idolatries, of all that live among the Christians, and falsely profess the name of Christ, unto the most imperial and most invincible prince, Zuldan Murad Chan [Murad III],

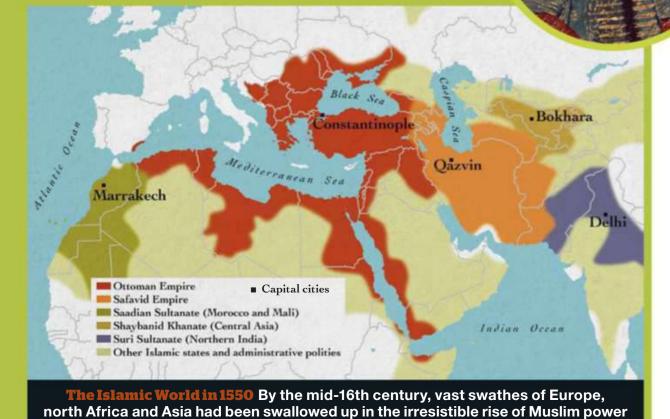
Zuldan Murad Chan [Murad III], the most mighty ruler of the kingdom of Turkey". Both rulers saw the strategic benefits of celebrating the shared tenets of their faith in contrast to the 'idolatry' of Catholic rites and intercession, even though their ends were more pragmatic and political.

The profits on some voyages were estimated at £70,000, producing

returns of 300 per cent

and Elizabeth exchanged flattering letters at the height of their commercial alliance

**Sultan Murad III** 



**Trading expands** 

At the height of Harborne's embassy the Turkey Company was dispatching 19 ships weighing 100–300 tonnes and crewed by nearly 800 seamen on an average of five voyages a year to trade in 10 Ottoman-controlled Mediterranean ports. The profits on some voyages were estimated at over £70,000, producing returns of nearly 300 per cent. Unsurprisingly, Elizabeth was encouraged to grant

another royal charter in 1585, this time creating the Barbary Company, importing Moroccan saltpetre, almonds, gold and sugar.

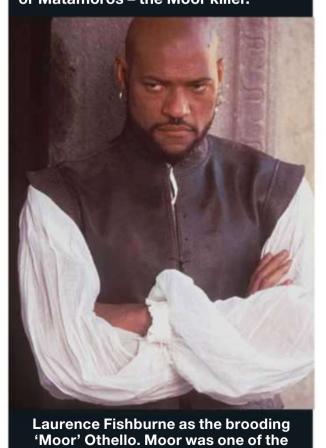
By the 1590s, prosperous Elizabethans were able to consume the fruits of the Anglo-Islamic trade, ranging from pearls, diamonds, sapphires, silks, brocades and damasks to rugs, carpets, embroideries and even Iznik pottery made in Bursa in Turkey. The importation of cotton wool from Turkish merchants stimulated Lancashire's textile industry, and the manufacture of Iranian raw silk provided employment for hundreds of workers who produced clothes 'in the Turkish manner' and household furnishings. The Turkey and Barbary imports enabled Elizabethans to wear silk

# Muslim stars of Shakespeare's plays

By the 1580s, Elizabeth's amicable relations with the Islamic world had drawn the attention of dramatists including Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. Plays featuring Turks and Moors became a fashion. Between 1576 and 1603 more than 60 were written with Muslim characters, though 'Muslim' only entered the language in 1615; before then 'Mahometans', 'Ottomites', 'Saracens', 'Moors', 'Pagans' or 'Turks' were used interchangeably to describe Muslims.

Shakespeare's plays are full of references to Moors and Turks. In 1592 his first history play, *Henry VI*, *Part 1*, mentions 'Mahomet' (Muhammad); two years later, the villainous Aaron the Moor appeared in the revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. Shakespeare put a different Moor onstage in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596): the Prince of Morocco, who tries unsuccessfully to woo the heroine Portia.

Shakespeare's interest in such characters culminated in *Othello* (c1600–03), subtitled 'The Moor of Venice'. Othello is a notoriously ambiguous figure, subject to racial slurs but also admired as a Moor who has converted to Christianity (though from what, we are never told) and whose marriage to the Venetian noblewoman Desdemona is destroyed by his jealous lieutenant lago, whose name in Spanish is Santiago, or Matamoros – the Moor killer.



early terms used for Muslims

changed by their encounter with Islam, in the trade they practised, the diplomacy they pursued and the clothes they wore

and cotton, drink sweet wines and consume aniseed, nutmeg, mace, turmeric and pistachios. The demand for currants alone from Ottoman-controlled Greek islands was so great that at the height of Elizabeth's reign 2,300 tonnes were being imported annually.

Slowly but surely the Tudors were changed by their encounter with Islam – in the trade they practised, the diplomacy they pursued, the clothes they wore and the things they ate.

Yet with Elizabeth's death in 1603, James VI and I's accession and peace with Spain in 1604, the need for an anti-Spanish Anglo-Islamic alliance collapsed. Over the subsequent centuries, academic 'orientalism' denigrated Islamic societies as decadent, despotic and backward, a myth reinforced by the ideology of British imperial rule over Islamic communities across the Middle East and east Asia. It is only in recent years – with the rise of religious fundamentalism, the infamous 'war on terror' and 'clash of civilisation' thesis – that the long and fraught history of Christian and Islamic encounters is being re-examined to find some response to the conflicts currently raging in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and even on the streets of Paris, London and Madrid.

Elizabeth's reign saw a brief and extremely strategic flowering of a rapprochement with the Islamic world and, though it was confused and misunderstood, it was a time at which those on both sides of the theological divide put aside faith to try to find ways of accommodating each other's differences.

A truly multicultural approach to world history should acknowledge that Tudor England was not insular and parochial but outward-looking and international, and that relations with the Muslim world were an important part of its story. If we want to understand the role played by many different faiths in this island's history, from Christians and Jews to British Muslims, then it is a story we need to acknowledge now more than ever before.



NUXMOSCHATA DISSECTA,

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Changing tastes Nutmeg, currants and ornate Turkish fabric, all highly prized commodities embraced by prosperous Elizabethans as a result of the new trade

**Jerry Brotton** is professor of renaissance studies at Queen Mary University of London

### DISCOVER MORE

### воок

➤ This Orient Isle: Elizabethan England and the Islamic World by Jerry Brotton (Allen Lane, 2016)

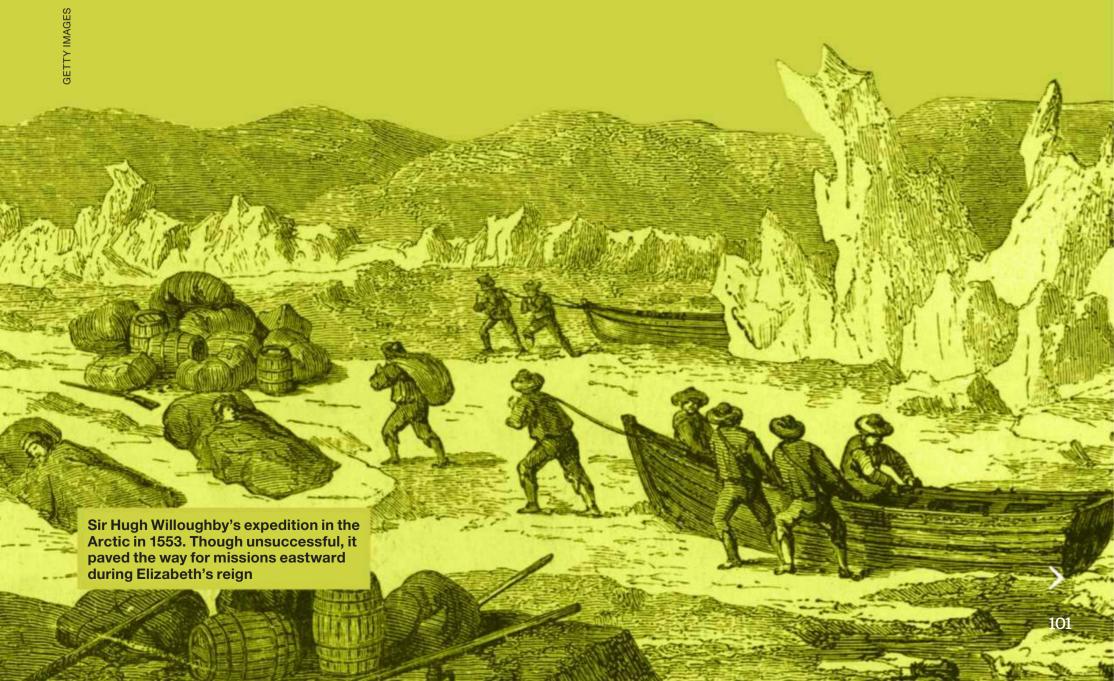
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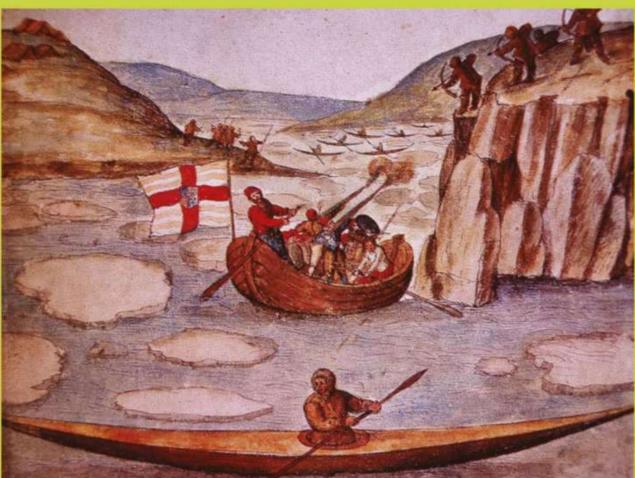
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# THE PIONEERS WHO BLAZED THE TRAIL FOR EMPIRE

In the 16th century, while Spain and Portugal colonised Africa and the Americas, English explorers set their sights on new routes to China. **Margaret Small** follows in the footsteps of adventurers whose discoveries paved the way for international trade – and a global empire









THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Adventurer and explorer Sir Martin
Frobisher, depicted in an early 18thcentury engraving; Frobisher's men
shoot at 'eskimos' (Inuits) in what's now
Arctic Canada during his search for the
North-West Passage; a map dated
1578, showing the route Frobisher
hoped to pioneer to 'Cathaia' (China)

searched for gold mines in such inhospitable locations as the sub-Arctic, and founded companies trading across the world.

## Origins of empire

The key players in English exploration in this period of transition were those who looked to north and east – often-overlooked men such as Jenkinson, Fitch and Frobisher, who laid the foundations of England's colonial and trading empire. Though England did not found a successful colony until four years after Elizabeth's death, the origins of the British empire lay in the English exploration of the Elizabethan period.

Elizabethan exploration would never

have taken place had it not been for a catastrophic collapse in traditional European markets for English goods, and a worsening political relationship with Spain. At the outset of the Elizabethan period, the English were still treading a delicate line between looking for new trading partners and trying to avoid angering the powerful Spanish empire. Spain controlled the southern route to Asia via the tip of South America and, though Drake's circumnavigation of the world (1577–80) proved that it was possible to outrun the Spanish and enjoy a profitable privateering venture through the Strait of Magellan, it was clear to the English that a southern trading route

was not a viable option.

The English therefore turned their attention northwards, improbably searching for open-water routes in the Arctic regions and seeking new trading partners in Asia. These northern and eastern voyages yielded England's real contributions to exploration in the Elizabethan period.

North America, rather than being seen as a land of opportunity, was seen as a monumental inconvenience that impeded easy access to China. Until the 16th century, though China was part of the 'known world', it remained largely inaccessible to the English – yet it was to that country that England turned its attention.

# **Elizabethans and the world / Explorers**

In c1552 English merchants, worried by the collapsing Antwerp market, sponsored Sir Hugh Willoughby and Richard Chancellor to search for a north-east passage to China. They sailed in 1553, but Willoughby and his crew died, their ship locked in ice off Norway or Russia; Chancellor was more successful, pioneering a sea route to what's now Arkhangelsk (on the White Sea coast in Russia's far north). Both failed to find the mythical open-sea route round northern Asia to China that had become an English obsession but, by the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, the north-eastern explorers had enabled England to set up the first of the great international monopolies - the Muscovy Company. In the Elizabethan period, this became the model for European expansionist trade.

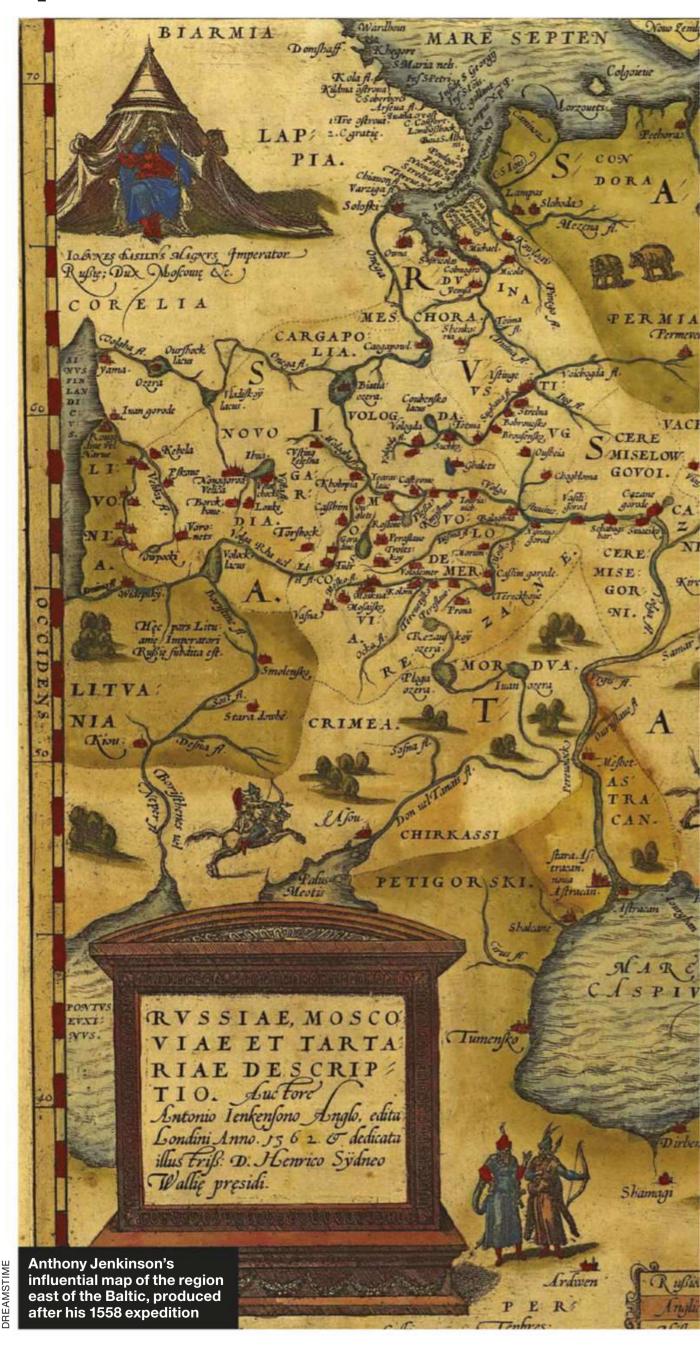
### **Unknown lands**

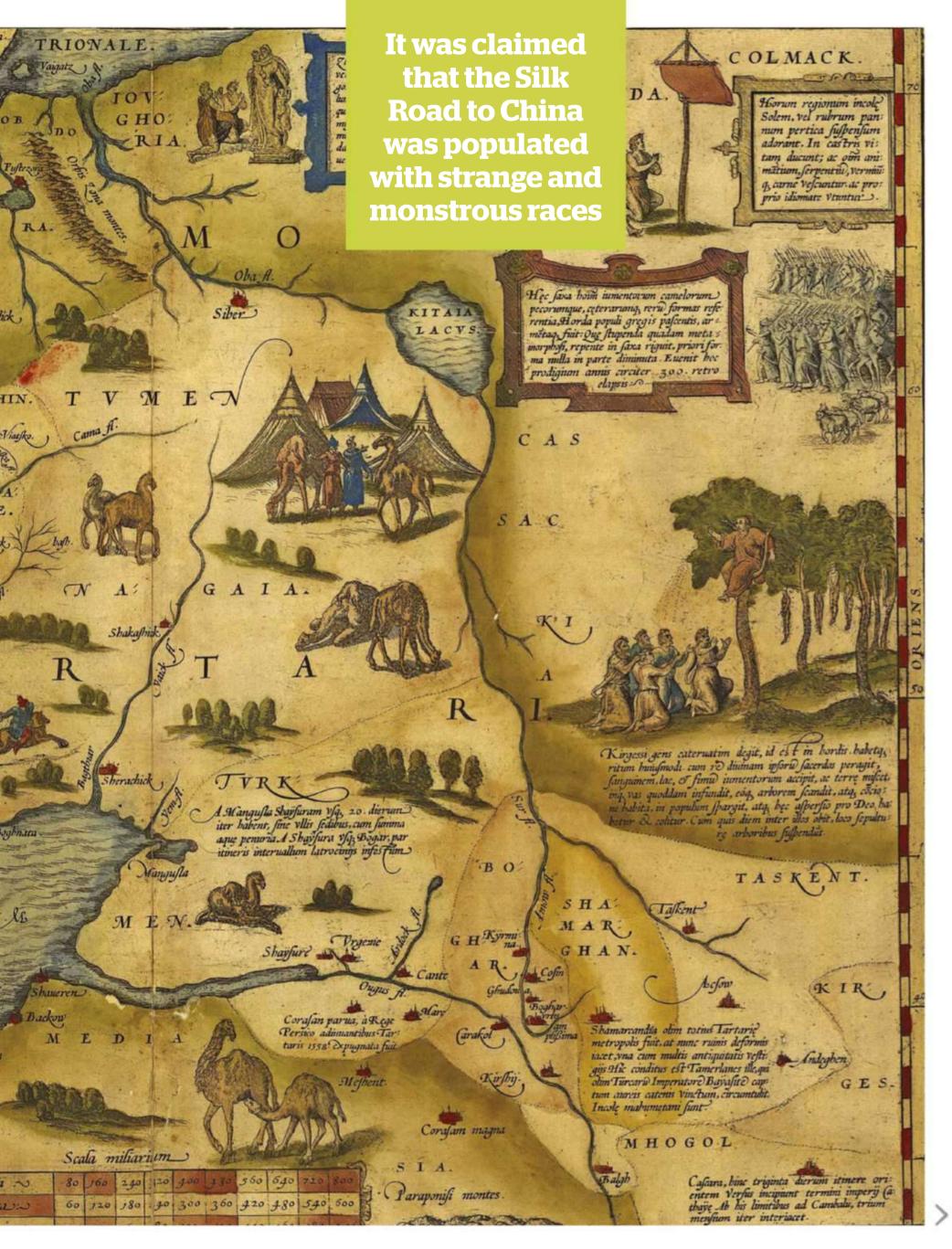
It is easy to forget that at the start of the Elizabethan age, to western Europeans at least, Russia was almost as unknown a region as China – a situation remedied by English explorers operating for the Muscovy Company. Having failed to find a northeast passage, over the following years English explorers began to turn their attention to land exploration instead.

As late as the 16th century, works published in western Europe claimed that the Silk Road (a series of trade routes linking China with the Middle East and India) was peopled with strange and monstrous races – dog-headed men, one-footed men, chest-headed men. Even those countries actively involved in the trade with China circulated weird and wonderful reports about the country and the land route to it.

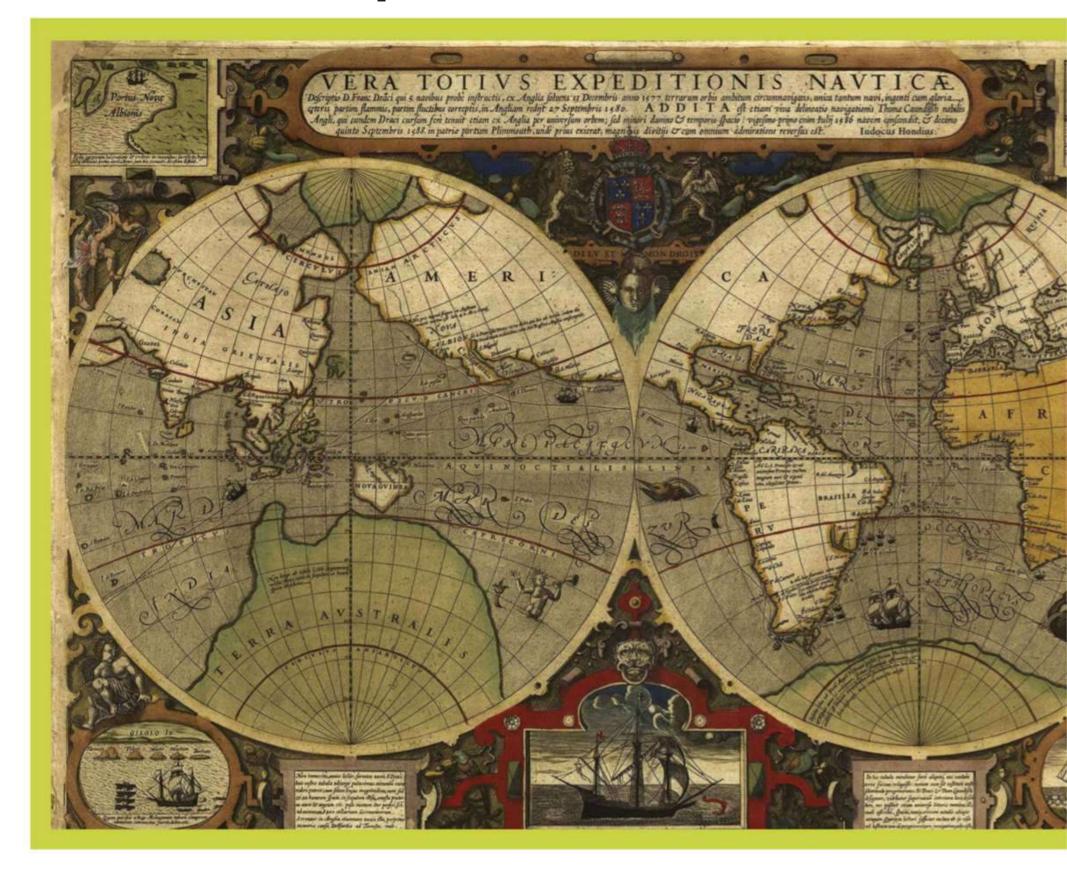
Anthony Jenkinson, an employee of the Muscovy Company, was sent to pioneer an overland route from Moscow to China a remarkable undertaking. His expedition did not find monstrous people, but it was beset with problems. Sailing from Russia across the Caspian Sea in 1558, he continued overland with a merchant caravan; his party subsequently became lost in the desert, travelled days without water, and was attacked by bandits who vowed to kill Christians and who did kill many of their camels. He made it as far as Bokhara (now Bukhara, in modern-day Uzbekistan) but banditry and war blocked his journey east, and he was forced to turn back.

Returning to the Caspian, he discovered that his boat had been robbed of everything removable, from sails to anchors. He and his resourceful companions fashioned their own sails, spun their own rope and made an anchor out of a wheel (though they then fortunately encountered another ship willing to trade them a spare anchor).





# Elizabethans and the world / Explorers



Jenkinson made it back to England alive and, rather than abandoning his career in exploration, began searching for routes along which to establish a trade network with Persia via Russia. In the course of his travels, he made a map of the region between Russia and Uzbekistan (see p104) that became the main source of European knowledge of the region.

Jenkinson's expedition to Central Asia was among a remarkable series of journeys eastward by Elizabethan travellers whose feats of exploration have been largely forgotten. Between them, men such as Jenkinson, Christopher Borough and John Newberry travelled through the Middle East, and Ralph Fitch ventured as far as Myanmar (Burma) and Malaysia. The information they gathered about territories, people and trading relationships proved invaluable as England moved from exploration to empire – it was key in the establishment of the Levant Company in 1592 and the East India Company in 1600.

These explorers had demonstrated the

impracticality of both land and sea routes east to China. By the 1580s, the English had instead begun to search for the fabled North-West Passage around North America to the far east – an endeavour epitomised by the stories of Martin Frobisher and John Davis. Though both had spent most of their lives at sea, and knew a great deal about ships and maritime

By the 1580s, the English had begun to search for the fabled North-West Passage survival, subarctic sailing was new to them. Remarkably, their first forays into uncharted waters in small wooden ships, braving freezing temperatures and pack ice, with scarce opportunities for obtaining food, did not convince either man to stay at home. Instead, between them they made a series of six ambitious voyages to find a north-west passage to China – demonstrating the confidence English explorers and their backers had gained during the course of Elizabeth's reign.

Frobisher's voyages were the best-funded of the Elizabethan period – partly because he believed he had found a source of gold on Baffin Island, just south of the Arctic Circle, on his first expedition of 1576. This discovery sparked the first English attempt at colonisation. Frobisher's backers (including the queen) endorsed the ludicrous idea of establishing a settlement on the island using prefabricated wooden housing shipped across from England. Luckily for future would-be colonisers – who would surely have





died in the barren and inhospitable conditions – the ship carrying the housing sank, and the project was abandoned. (The 'gold' Frobisher brought back was found to be nothing more than iron pyrite – fool's gold.)

# **Arctic route to empire**

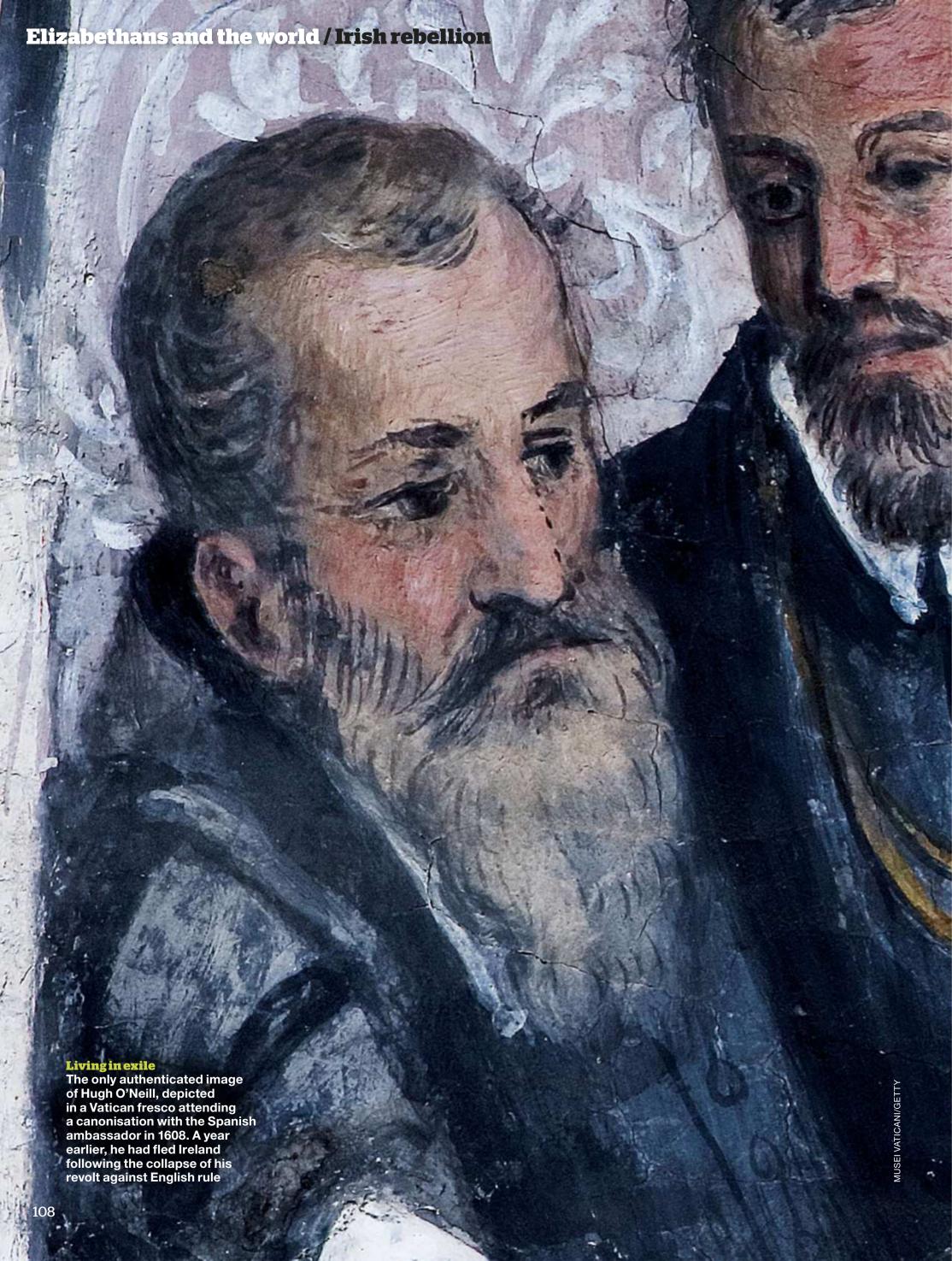
Nearly a decade later, in 1585 and subsequent years, Davis undertook three attempts to find the North-West Passage. Like Frobisher, he failed to find a route through to Asia, but the voyages of both men are noteworthy in the history of exploration. They contributed a vast amount of knowledge about how to navigate and survive in the Arctic. They helped to map regions wholly unexplored by Europeans. They also demonstrated a new aspect of Elizabethan exploration – a willingness to branch into colonisation, leading the transition to empire-building.

Like the earlier eastward expeditions, these Arctic missions originally stemmed from a desire to find new sources of wealth without trespassing on Spanish-claimed territory, but they also occurred at a pivotal time in Elizabethan exploration. By the late 1570s, the risk of incurring Spain's wrath was no longer an issue. England had gained new confidence in her naval techniques, and war with Spain was on the horizon anyway. As a result, Elizabethan explorers and navigators redirected their attention southward, to Spanishclaimed territory. Later Drake's circumnavigation was the most profitable English voyage of the 16th century, having achieved its original mission, plundering a Spanish gold ship off the Pacific coast of South America. Ralegh searched for gold mines in South America and backed the English colony founded at Roanoke in North Carolina in 1585. The following year, Thomas Cavendish emulated Drake in raiding Spanish ships and completing a voyage around the world.

Though these men's endeavours have endured in English historical lore, in some ways their importance is exaggerated. By the end of the 16th century, all English attempts at western colonisation had failed – there was no territorial empire. Instead, the Elizabethan era's real contributions to exploration lay in the less-known voyages and travels to the north and east.

These expeditions brought about new models of trade – the monopoly companies – and expanded geographical knowledge, yet they were journeys born out of desperation. They originated in the search for new trading partners in the face of a collapsed trading relationship with Europe, and a desire not to antagonise the dominant world power. The Elizabethan age of exploration has been seen as a period of greatness – but its greatest achievements stemmed from weakness.

Margaret Small is lecturer in early modern history at the University of Birmingham, with a focus on European exploration and colonisation in the 16th century



# ELIZABETH'S IRISHSHIPS NEISHSISIS

**Hiram Morgan** tells the story of the Irish earl Hugh O'Neill, a brilliant warrior and slippery negotiator who ran rings around Elizabeth I's greatest generals and almost ended English rule in Ireland

n the dying days of the 16th century, one man drove Elizabeth I to distraction, wrecked the career of one of her most celebrated captains, brought her nation close to bankruptcy, and threw the very survival of her administration in Ireland into grave doubt. That man was Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. His story is one of the most remarkable in the history of Anglo-Irish relations – and the Nine Years' War empowered by O'Neill's uprising threatened England's hold on the island.

When Hugh was born, in about 1550, Ireland was a divided island – one whose history had been shaped by its English neighbour. In 1171, Henry II had launched a concerted invasion of Ireland, setting the scene for four centuries of considerable English influence, culminating with Henry VIII's decision to have himself declared King of Ireland in 1541.

As Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558, there were effectively two Irelands: the 'English Pale' around Dublin and the south, containing English-style towns; and the predominately Gaelic west and north, dominated by powerful clans such as the O'Neills and O'Donnells. Suspicious of

English attempts to exert control over them, in the late 16th century the Gaelic Irish became ever more restive.

This unrest was to heavily influence Hugh O'Neill's early years. His father Matthew, Baron of Dungannon, was assassinated by his own half-brother Shane in 1558, and Hugh's elder brother Brian was killed by another dynastic competitor in 1562. Hugh, taken into crown wardship near Dublin, was at first happy to work with the English occupiers, accepting the role of maintaining a troop of soldiers to protect the borders of the Pale. But his attempts to increase his power in Ulster soon brought him into conflict with the authorities.

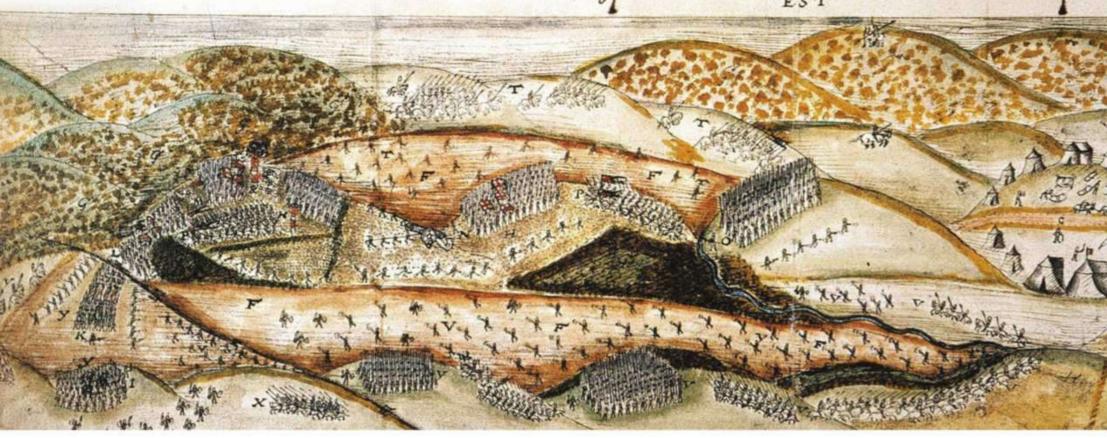
# **Double alliance**

Hugh's political ambitions stemmed from the O'Neill family heritage as Ulster overlords. His grandfather Conn O'Neill had been made Earl of Tyrone by Henry VIII, though internecine fighting between Conn's heirs had temporarily robbed Hugh of power. To remedy this situation, he decided to build an alliance with historic rivals the O'Donnells of Tirconnell. In 1574 O'Neill divorced his first wife and married Siobhan, daughter of Sir Hugh O'Donnell. Then, in 1587 – the same



Queen Elizabeth, pictured around 1580, struggled to cope with the Irish rebellion

Hugh O'Neill's
escalating
demands forced
Elizabeth back
on the offensive
- with disastrous
consequences for
the English



year he was confirmed as Earl of Tyrone – he betrothed his daughter Rose to Sir Hugh O'Donnell's heir, 'Red Hugh'.

As a strategy for extending O'Neill's power in Ulster, the double alliance was a masterstroke. However, it signalled a potential threat to English plans to establish control of Ulster. And so, in an attempt to block the marriage, the Dublin authorities abducted Red Hugh (having lured him aboard a ship with the promise of wine) and held him hostage in Dublin.

Hugh O'Neill described his intended son-in-law's detention in Dublin Castle as "most prejudice that might happen unto me". Red Hugh languished in the castle for over four years till 1592 when, using a silk rope supplied by accomplices outside, he slipped out through a privy. Back in Ulster with his father-in-law, together they subdued local opponents and began secretly swearing in confederates to thwart English control.

# Sleight of hand

Hugh O'Neill was a supremely canny operator – a master at wrong-footing his opponents with sleight of hand - reflected in his initially low-key campaign for the territory of Fermanagh in Ulster. When an English sheriff was imposed there in 1593, O'Neill was determined to resist – but by stealth. He fought a proxy war, pretending to be a supporter of the crown while directing a military campaign against it. When his brother Cormac defeated an English attempt to resupply its garrison at Enniskillen, Hugh absolved himself of responsibility by claiming he was unable to control his followers. Yet he was reported as arriving soon afterwards to divide up the spoils.

Meanwhile, Hugh was in the process of converting the traditional axe-wielding gallowglasses (a class of elite mercenary

warriors) into musketeers, and sending Catholic clerics to ask Spain for aid.

Such smoke and mirrors could work for only so long. In June 1595 O'Neill was declared a traitor for conspiring with Spain – and was forced to swap subterfuge for open conflict. Abandoning any pretences of aiding the English, he joined with O'Donnell in leading Ireland's Gaelic lords in a campaign that later become known as the Nine Years' War. That year O'Neill launched attacks at Blackwater Fort, an English garrison in the heart of Tyrone, and then against Sir Henry Bagenal, the marshal of the queen's army in Ireland, at Clontibret in



A statue of O'Neill's ally Red Hugh O'Donnell in Donegal Town

authorities abducted Red Hugh, having lured him aboard a ship with the promise of wine

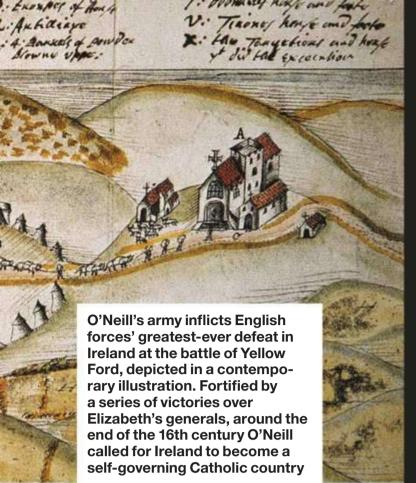
southern Ulster. Veterans in that English expedition were stunned by how well armed and disciplined O'Neill's army was.

An increasingly anxious Queen Elizabeth now sent in renowned soldier Sir John Norris. He was flushed with recent successes against Spanish armies in Brittany, but was defeated at Mullaghbrack near Armagh. The English, fearing a protracted struggle and Spanish intervention, offered the Irish confederation de facto control of most of Ulster and North Connaught, and tacit toleration of Catholicism (banned since Elizabeth's accession). However, soon after the Irish had agreed, Spanish agents arrived in Tirconnell urging O'Neill to escalate the war.

Spanish king Philip II, eager to keep England distracted to prevent its resources being committed elsewhere, now provided the Irish with money and munitions to continue the war and spread their actions into other provinces. In a stop-start campaign of truces and talks, O'Neill kept upping the ante. By December 1597 he was demanding "free liberty of conscience" for all Irishmen, and reciting abuses against the Irish going back 30 years. Soon he was calling into question the entire English presence in Ireland.

These escalating demands forced Elizabeth back onto the offensive – with disastrous consequences for the English. On 14 August 1598, O'Neill's army killed Bagenal and crushed his army at Yellow Ford – the heaviest defeat ever suffered by the English in Ireland.

It's been argued that this was the moment at which O'Neill should have struck the decisive blow against the English – marching on Dublin, which was virtually defenceless. He didn't, instead lingering in the north, more concerned with preventing an English



entering Munster and overthrowing the plantation there. With only Ireland's towns in English hands – and their Catholic inhabitants viewed with great suspicion by the crown – Elizabeth's grip on the island was rapidly being loosened.

The queen's response was to dispatch the largest English army ever to set foot in Ireland, headed by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. Elizabeth instructed Essex to confront O'Neill on the battlefield. Instead, he marched his 17,000 men fruitlessly around the midlands, Munster and south Leinster. Worse still, he resolved to negotiate with O'Neill in person.

Outfoxed by his wily adversary – who ran rings around him in negotiations – Essex agreed a truce that many in England considered not only a humiliation but a gross dereliction of duty. Returning to London in September 1599, Essex's reputation was severely damaged. He was put on trial and executed for treason in 1601.

## Wicked policies

Meanwhile, Hugh O'Neill's campaign to eject the English from Ireland was going from strength to strength. Having seen off England's greatest captain, O'Neill made a play that English officials had long been fearing. He could not win the towns by force of arms; instead, he issued a proclamation appealing to their inhabitants as fellow Catholics and Irishmen. "I will employ myself to the utmost of my power in their defence and for the extirpation of heresy, the planting of the Catholic religion, the delivery of our country of infinite murders, wicked and detestable policies by which this kingdom was hitherto governed, nourished in obscurity and ignorance, maintained in barbarity and incivility and consequently of infinite evils w to be rehearsed." of infinite evils which are too lamentable

# Where the Irish fought back...

This map shows the principal clashes between the rebel Gaelic forces and the English armies of Elizabeth I during the Nine Years' War



MAPILLUSTRATION BY PAUL HEWITT-BATTLEFIELD DESIGN

# ...and what happened to Ulster after the war

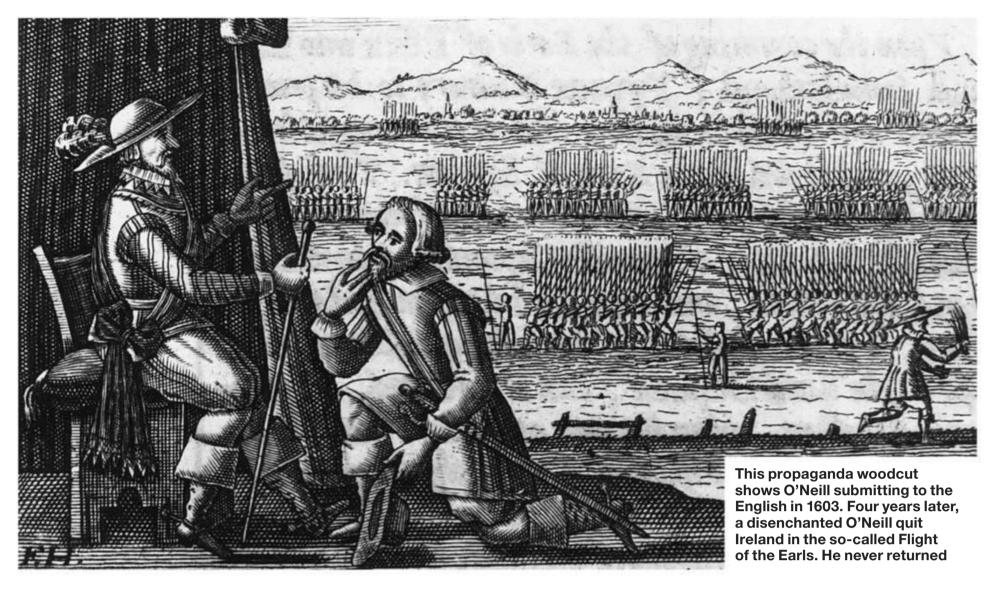
In the 16th century, Ulster was described "as the very fostermother and example of all the rebellions of Ireland". The province had been least affected by the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland and remained

its most Gaelic. But, in the wake of the defeat of Hugh O'Neill (left), that situation was to be turned on its head. After the flight of the Ulster lords into exile in 1607, the crown was able to undertake the massive

plantation of the province, under which 80 per cent of clan lands was transferred to English and Scottish landholders for colonisation by **British settlers. The city of London** made a special investment in the project, developing the city and county of Londonderry.

Within 50 years, Ulster had been culturally and politically transformed. But with the native population growing increasingly resentful of the influx of British immigrants boosted by Presbyterians from lowland Scotland - that transformation was to bring huge instability.

# Elizabethans and the world / Irish rebellion



This remarkable rhetoric turned the language of English colonialism on its head. O'Neill followed up the proclamation with 22 articles that would have converted Ireland into a self-governing Catholic country under nominal English sovereignty. Sir Robert Cecil, Elizabeth's secretary of state, seeing the proposal on its arrival in London, dismissed it as fanciful with a single word: "Ewtopia".

Crucially, O'Neill's exhortation failed to convince Ireland's English-speaking townsmen, who suspected that he was masking an ambition for kingship with a feigned concern for their immortal souls. When they rejected his overtures, he pleaded unsuccessfully with Rome to excommunicate them. Pope Clement VIII did, though, appoint him 'Captain-General of the Catholic Army in Ireland'.

### Too little, too late

The tide was turning. Essex's replacement, the more capable Baron Mountjoy, at last brought England's superior resources to bear. O'Neill's only hope of realising his ambitions now appeared to be the landing of a Spanish Armada in Ireland. Mountjoy fought a year-round war, using scorchedearth tactics to devastate O'Neill's agricultural base. Then the long-awaited expedition to Derry finally landed, snatching much of Tyrone and Tirconnell out of the grasp of their lords.

As a result, when Spain did finally commit forces to Ireland, it proved too little, too late. The Spanish landed at Kinsale and

Castlehaven in County Cork, which the English had retaken, so O'Neill and O'Donnell had to march the length of the country to join forces with them. When the two sides met in battle at Kinsale on Christmas Eve 1601, the Irish were beaten. It was a decisive blow to O'Neill. "Today this kingdom is lost," he declared.



Charles Blount, 8th Baron Mountjoy, used a scorched-earth policy to fight O'Neill

At the end of the Nine Years' War, Ireland was completely under English rule for the first time ever The war dragged on for another 15 months, until O'Neill finally surrendered to Mountjoy at Mellifont in 1603, unaware that Elizabeth was already a week dead. His long campaign to oust the English from Ireland was over – a remarkable but ultimately doomed endeavour.

For all O'Neill's brilliance, the Nine Years' War ended with Ireland completely under English rule for the first time in its history. Though pardoned at Mellifont, O'Neill was unable to bear the humiliation of English power and the imposition of Protestantism. In 1607, he and the other Ulster lords departed Ireland in the so-called Flight of the Earls. Neither Elizabeth's successor, James VI and I, nor the Spanish, now at peace with England, had any need of O'Neill, and he died an impoverished exile in Rome.

Like Shakespeare and Cervantes, O'Neill breathed his last in 1616. And though those two writers claimed the lion's share of public adulation in 2016, there's a strong argument to be made that, in his own day, O'Neill was far more important.

Hiram Morgan teaches history at University College Cork. He is author of *Tyrone's Rebellion:* The Outbreak of the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland (Royal Historical Society, 1993)

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# Nicola Tallis on... The enduring appeal of the Elizabethan era

# "During Elizabeth's 44-year reign England was transformed into an increasingly wealthy cultural hub"

he second half of the 16th century was an age of rapidly evolving culture, tumultuous politics and intrigue, religious conflicts, worldwide exploration and bitter power struggles. Small wonder, then, that the events of the turbulent Elizabethan era continue not only to fascinate but also to inspire a thirst for knowledge that is seemingly unquenchable. At the centre of this ever-changing world was one of the most famous queens in history: Elizabeth I.

It is largely thanks to Elizabeth that curiosity about the period shows no signs of abating. And the queen was as much a source of fascination in her own lifetime as she is today – in no small part because she resisted conforming to expectations of a 16th-century woman.

A fiercely intelligent individual who witnessed the brutality of her age first-hand, Elizabeth was forced to learn some cruel lessons from an early age. Her mother was executed before her third birthday; her stepmother, Catherine Howard, was beheaded when she was eight; and she endured a spell in the Tower of London, suspected of complicity in the Wyatt Rebellion of 1554. In short, Elizabeth's youth was blighted by fear and uncertainty. But rather than allowing these experiences to break her, Elizabeth learned from them, and determined to be different. What is more, she succeeded.

From the moment of her accession in 1558 Elizabeth was expected to take a husband, but instead defied her ministers by declaring her intention to remain unmarried. Few believed that she would maintain that line, yet she remained determined to rule alone – sole mistress in a realm dominated by men. Thus the cult of the Virgin Queen was born.

Throughout her reign, Elizabeth played on that persona and on her femininity. Though she often chose to identify herself and her strength with male rule, famously claiming during the dangerous days of the Spanish Armada campaign that she had "the heart and stomach of a king", Elizabeth continually referred to her womanhood.

Her image provided the perfect outlet for controlling these aspects of her identity. More than 100 likenesses of Elizabeth were produced during her lifetime – and it was always her, rather than any

Nicola Tallis is a historian and researcher. Her latest book is Elizabeth's Rival: The Tumultuous Tale of Lettice Knollys, Countess of Leicester (Michael O'Mara Books, 2017)

artist, who decided how she was portrayed, and how those portrayals might be interpreted. In her authorised portraits, the queen was always richly dressed and adorned with an array of costly jewels – often pearls, symbolic of purity, thereby reinforcing the qualities of the Virgin Queen. In a further projection of majesty, she was often also depicted with symbols of her authority, including her crown.

Elizabeth fully understood the importance of image to leadership, and throughout the course of her reign successfully manipulated hers in order to boost her popularity and ensure that she was viewed as a powerful female sovereign. Elizabeth's leadership drew the admiration of many of her contemporaries, which is part of the reason she has earned the continued admiration of many modern historians.

Another factor that may help explain why we are drawn to her era is that during her 44-year reign England was transformed into an increasingly wealthy cultural hub. Art and literature thrived, and the first permanent theatres in England attracted throngs of people eager to witness the latest offerings from some of the most talented playwrights and actors of the day. We remember the Elizabethan period as the heyday of William Shakespeare, whose work is still performed and received with as much enthusiasm now as it was then. We are thus able to relive some of the moments that once enraptured the Elizabethan crowds, and

experience their sense of humour, tragedy and romance first-hand. Crucially, at the helm of this cultural evolution was a woman – and an extraordinary woman, at that.

So why is it important to continue studying Elizabeth and her world, and what lessons can we learn from it? Elizabeth was a different kind of queen – one who was not afraid to stand out, and who chose to walk her own path, often in the face of resistance. Moreover,

she successfully managed her image as the Virgin Queen, and in so doing ensured that she was viewed – and continues to be remembered – with both awe and adulation.

When we revisit that period and consider why we are enthralled – and though there's no denying the allure of Shakespeare, the portraits and the poems – the epicentre of the fascination is clear: Elizabeth herself.

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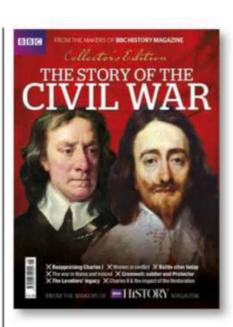
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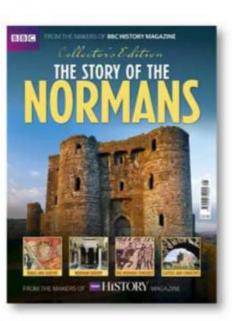
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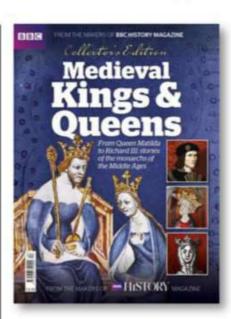
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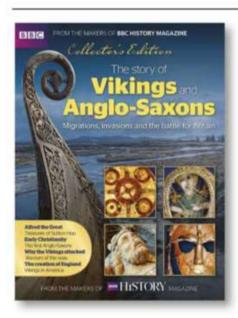
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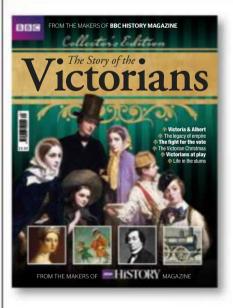
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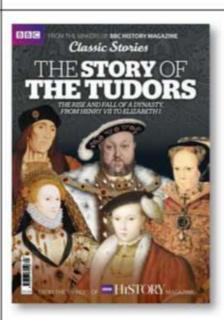
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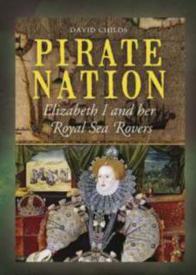
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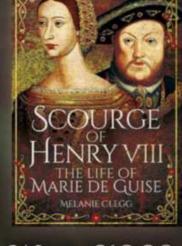
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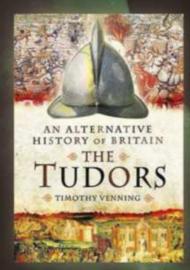
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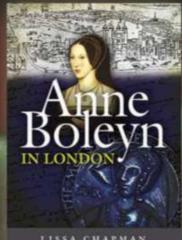
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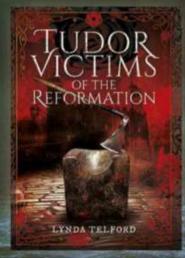
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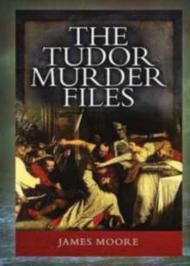
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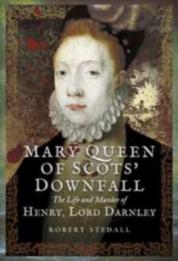
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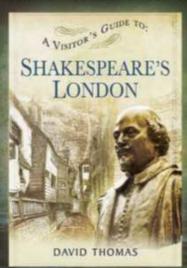
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